A Burdensome Labor

But the Egyptians
mistreated
and oppressed us,
assigning us a
burdensome labor.
—Deuteronomy 26:6

CHICKASAW COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI, 1929
IDA MAE BRANDON GLADNEY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

EUSTIS, FLORIDA, 1939

GEORGE SWANSON STARLING

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

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

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

The Appointed Time of Their Coming

Even the stork
in the sky knows
her appointed seasons,
and the dove,
the swift and the thrush
observe the time
of their migration.
—Jeremiah 8:7

NEAR OKOLONA, MISSISSIPPI, LATE AUTUMN 1937
IDA MAE BRANDON GLADNEY

IDA MAE AND THE CHILDREN rumbled over curled ribbons of dirt road in a brother-in-law's truck from Miss Theenie's house to the train depot in Okolona. Piled high around them were all the worldly possessions they could manage to carry—the overalls and Sunday clothes, the cook pots and kerosene lamps, a Bible and the quilts that Ida Mae and Miss Theenie had sewn out of used-up remnants of the clothes they had worn out tilling the Mississippi soil. Miss Theenie had not wanted them to go and had prayed over them and with them and then watched as her second-born daughter left the rutted land of the ancestors. *"May the Lord be the first one in the car," Miss Theenie had whispered about the train they were hoping to catch, "and the last out."*

Heading to the depot through the dust hollows and the cotton fields

and away from the only place she had ever lived, Ida Mae did not know what would become of them or if her husband could actually pull this thing off. She did not know if Mr. Edd would let them go or stand in their way, if her husband would get anything from Mr. Edd at settlement, if they would be better off up north or, if they failed, worse off for having the nerve to try to leave—and if, in the end, they would truly make it out of Mississippi at all.

But there at the depot was her husband, the taciturn man who kept his emotions to himself, who had courted her and won her over despite Miss Theenie's objections, and who had decided that he did not want his family under the mercurial thumb of Mississippi for one more hour. He had not asked Ida Mae what she thought about leaving or whether she wanted to go. He had merely announced his decision as the head of the family, as was his way, and Ida Mae had gone along with it, as was hers.

She had not wanted to leave Miss Theenie and her sister Talma and all the people she had ever known, but her lot was with her husband, and she would go where he thought it best. Both she and Miss Theenie could take comfort in knowing that Ida Mae's sister Irene would be there to receive them in Milwaukee and that half her husband's siblings were up north in Beloit, Wisconsin, and in Chicago, and so Ida Mae would not be alone in that new land.

Mr. Edd had been a man of his word. He did not try to keep George and Ida Mae from leaving. George had gotten a few dollars from Mr. Edd and managed to secure four train tickets to Milwaukee via Chicago, having likely secured them not in Houston, where he might have been recognized, but in Okolona, where he was less likely to be noticed and where they would be leaving from.

And so the family—Ida Mae, George, Velma, James, and the little one still forming in Ida Mae's belly—boarded a train in Okolona. They were packed in with the baggage in the Jim Crow car with the other colored passengers with their babies and boxes of fried chicken and boiled eggs and their belongings overflowing from paper bags in the overhead compartment. The train pulled out of the station at last, and Ida Mae was on her way out of Chickasaw County and out of the state of Mississippi for the first time in her life.

body's given name until they got married or died. It left mourners at southern funerals not knowing for sure who was in the casket unless the preacher called out "Junebug" in the eulogy. *Oh, that's Junebug that died!*

Sometimes parents tried to superimpose glory on their offspring with the grandest title they could think of, or, if they were feeling especially militant, the name of a senator or president from the North. It was a way of affixing acceptability if not greatness. It forced everyone, colored and white, to call their janitor sons Admiral or General or John Quincy Adams, whether anybody, including the recipient, liked it or not. White southerners who would not call colored people Mr. or Mrs. were made to sputter out Colonel or Queen instead.

And so, growing up, he was called not by his first name, Robert, but by the more imperial-sounding Pershing. The problem was that by the time he got to grade school nobody in Monroe knew or cared much about the feats of an ancient general way off in Europe somewhere. It had no meaning to the people around him, and he was the only Pershing they knew. The colored children in New Town had a hard time pronouncing it. They called him *Percy, Purly, Persian, Putty,* which made an ill-fitting name even less bearable and a mockery of his mother's intentions.

He was starting over now. His mother was gone. What he would be called would be up to him. In California, he would be Robert or, better yet, Bob. Bob with a martini and stingy-brim hat. It was modern and hip, and it suited the new version of himself as the leading man in his own motion picture. He had tested it out in Atlanta, and it had caught on. The people in California who knew him back home would get used to it in time. *Bob.* Simple and direct and easy to remember. He rolled the word around in his mind, and he liked it.

ON THE ILLINOIS CENTRAL RAILROAD, OCTOBER 1937

IDA MAE BRANDON GLADNEY

IDA MAE SAT UP and watched Mississippi blur past her through the film of soot on the train window. By some miracle, she and her husband

had managed to keep their secret from most of the plantation throughout the picking season and left whole branches of the family and people they had known since childhood in the dark as to what they were up to. They couldn't chance it and had no choice. "You didn't go around telling neighbors and everybody else in the farm. A lot of 'em didn't know we was gone," she said, "till we was gone."

The two of them, along with little James and Velma, boarded a screeching metal horse on wheels, heading north and slightly west on the Mobile and Ohio Railroad, a feeder line to the main rail. They rode in the darkness on an old train called The Rebel, a mule-headed relic of the Confederate South, rattling toward something they had never seen and did not know. Over the course of the next twenty-four hours, they would have to collect their belongings and change trains in Jackson, Tennessee, to board the Illinois Central Railroad, the legendary rail system that, for a great portion of the twentieth century, carried upward of a million colored people from the Deep South up the country's central artery, across the Mason-Dixon Line, and into a new world called the Midwest. It carried so many southern blacks north that Chicago would go from 1.8 percent black at the start of the twentieth century to one-third black by the time the flow of people finally began to slow in 1970. Detroit's black population would skyrocket from 1.4 percent to 44 percent during the era of the Migration.

It would not have occurred to them that they were riding history. They were leaving as a family, not as a movement, on the one thing going north. But as it happened, the Illinois Central, along with the Atlantic Coast Line and Seaboard Air Line railroads, running between Florida and New York, and the Southern Pacific, connecting Texas and California, had become the historic means of escape, the Overground Railroad for slavery's grandchildren. It hurtled its passengers along the same route and under the same night sky as the Underground Railroad, the secret network of safe houses leading north that had spirited slaves to freedom the previous century.

Even before the first anxious sharecroppers boarded the Illinois Central, sometime in the early stages of World War I, the railroad had a pedigree that made it inadvertently synonymous with freedom to black southerners who could manage to secure a ticket. The Illinois Central Railroad was founded in 1850 as a connector between Chicago and Cairo, a river town at the southern tip of the state, adding steamboats down the Mississippi and ultimately rail lines to New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico. For a time, Mark Twain piloted the railroad's steam-

boats up and down the Mississippi, and Abraham Lincoln was a rising attorney on retainer to the railroad before his election to the White House.

The Civil War brought an end to regular passenger use, and the railroad was pressed into the service of the Union Army, funneling troops and supplies from the North to the South for the war effort. At war's end, the railroad laid or acquired tracks into the more isolated precincts of Mississippi, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Louisiana and unwittingly made the North a more accessible prospect for black southerners desperate to escape. Each train route of the Illinois Central had a name of its own. The trains were called The Planter, The Creole, The Diamond, The Panama Limited, and, most famous of all, the one that Ida Mae rode, The Louisiane, later renamed The City of New Orleans, which went straight up the country's spine from the Mississippi Delta to the flat wheat prairie land and Chicago itself.

The Illinois Central brought more than merely the chance to leave. It brought parcels from the North that became accidental marketing brochures—the catalogues from Sears, Roebuck, the lovingly wrapped boxes of hand-me-downs from relatives who had made it north, and the discreetly bound copies of the *Chicago Defender,* the colored newspaper that was virulently anti-South and for that reason virtually banned in the region. Pullman porters smuggled the paper into the luggage holds during their regular runs between Chicago and the Deep South, hurling them out by the bundle at strategic points along their routes and thus spreading the word about the possibilities of the North. This makeshift distribution system helped make the *Chicago Defender* one of the most widely circulated black newspapers in the country by the end of World War I and its founder, a migrant from Georgia named Robert Sengstacke Abbott, one of the richest colored men in the country.

The Illinois Central sped past the pine woods and the cotton fields, and in time the railroad's cars were packed with the peasant caste of the South, "the huddled masses yearning to breathe free" in their own country and, save for their race and citizenry, not unlike the passengers crossing the Atlantic in steerage with the intention of never returning to the old country.

Ida Mae and her family boarded the Illinois Central in the middle of the Great Migration, during the statistical lull between the peak out-

flows of colored southerners during the world wars, unaware of the enormity of the thing and what it might mean beyond themselves.

ON THE SILVER METEOR, APRIL 14, 1945
GEORGE SWANSON STARLING

GEORGE WAS STUFFED into a hardback seat in the baggage car on the Silver Meteor up the East Coast. He was packed in with other colored passengers breaking open their cold chicken and hard-boiled eggs and shushing their children. He didn't pay them much mind. He was still too mad thinking about why he was on that train in the first place.

"I was angry," he said later, conjuring up emotions of fifty years before. "I was angry with my people. We caused them to earn more money in one day than they ever earned in a whole week. And they would complain, 'us not lettin' them work' one or two times. It was only about two or three occasions where we didn't work because we didn't get the price we asked for. And they go to the man's house at night and complain. They made it even worse for us. They couldn't see that we were helping them till after we all scattered."

For once he was riding in the front of something, as opposed to the customary back of everything else. On the railroad, the Jim Crow car was usually the first car behind the coal-fired locomotive that belched soot, fumes, and engine noise. It was the car that would take the brunt of any collision in the event of a train wreck. It was where the luggage and colored passengers were placed, even though their train fare was no different from what white passengers in the quieter rear of the train paid for the same class of service. He and the other colored passengers just had to live with it. George gave it little thought because he was on his way out.