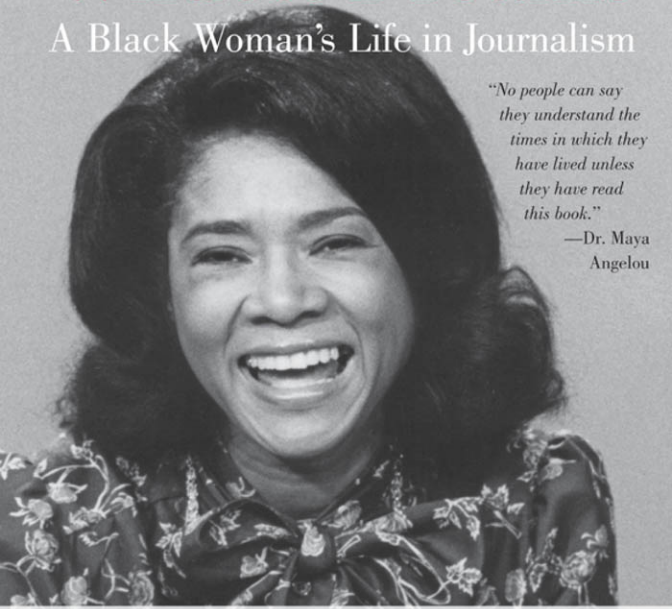
Never in My Wildest Dreams

A Black Woman's Life in Journalism



"No people can say they understand the times in which they have lived unless they have read this book."
—Dr. Maya Angelou

BELVA DAVIS

WITH VICKI HADDOCK

FOREWORD BY BILL COSBY

An Excerpt From

Never in My Wildest Dreams: A Black Woman's Life in Journalism

By Belva Davis
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Foreword
by Bill Cosby

When we had a houseboat in San Francisco Bay in the late 1960s, Mrs. Cosby and I, we would watch the news on TV. And there would be Belva Davis, out reporting stories and anchoring the newscasts. And my wife looked at me and said, "That's the most relaxed woman I've ever seen at being perfect."

What's important to remember is that those of us who made history, those of us who were among the first of our race to do some particular thing in the United States, disproved fallacies that said our lips wouldn't allow us to pronounce words properly; that our brains wouldn't allow us to write, to speak, to make anyone understand anything; and then, of course, that our color would not only turn off viewers but lead them to turn us off as well. Belva Davis, like tennis star Althea Gibson, like educator and presidential advisor Mary McLeod Bethune, carried it off. She made covering the news look so natural, so easy, that people couldn't believe that it was her job.

Belva Davis was someone who sustained us, who made us proud. We looked forward to seeing her prove the stereotypical ugliness of those days to be wrong. She was the first woman of color that many viewers came to know and trust, and she met that challenge with integrity and dignity and grace.

We had first become acquainted some years earlier, when I was doing standup comedy at clubs like the hungry i in San Francisco, and Belva was a disc jockey on black radio station KDIA in Oakland. I was first her interview subject, then her studio guest on her own radio show, and then her friend. I was happy to take the stage and formally introduce her when she was honored with the International Women's Media Foundation's Lifetime Achievement Award. She has always had energy to burn, whether she's

gathering the news or fighting for minority rights or producing a community event.

People should know that Belva Davis is a pure, pure woman—warm and generous. But they also should know that they should be careful if they haven't behaved or been fair or honest. When this lady puts pen to paper, the world had better watch out.

one

"What the Hell Are You Niggers Doing in Here?"

I could feel the hostility rising like steam off a cauldron of vitriol: floor delegates and gallery spectators at the Republican National Convention were erupting in catcalls aimed at the press. South of San Francisco, people were sweltering inside the cavernous Cow Palace, which typically hosted rodeos. In July of 1964 it offered ringside seats for the breech birth of a right-wing revolution.

My radio news director, Louis Freeman, and I lacked credentials for the press box—actually we knew that some whites at this convention would find our mere presence offensive. Although Louis was brilliant and had a deep baritone voice and a journalism degree, his first boss had warned Louis he might never become a radio reporter because Negro lips were "too thick to pronounce polysyllabic words." But Louis, whose enunciation was flawless, eventually landed an on-the-hour news slot on KDIA-AM, the Bay Area's premier soul-gospel-jazz station; and he was determined to cover the convention. It was said that the national press was flocking to the GOP confab to "report Armageddon." Louis wanted to be at the crux of the story, relaying to our black listeners all the news that white reporters might deem insignificant. I was the station's intrepid ad traffic manager, a thirty-one-year-old divorced mother of two, who had no journalism training. No question Louis would have preferred a more formidable companion: I'm delicately boned and stand merely five foot one in stockings. But I was an eager volunteer. More to the point, I was his *only* volunteer. And I was, in his words, "a moxie little thing." He had finagled two spectator passes from one of the black delegates—they made up less than 1 percent of convention participants. So there we were, perched in the shadows under the rafters,

scribbling notes and recording speeches, mistakenly presuming we had found the safest spot to be.

Day One of the convention had been tense but orderly. GOP organizers had strictly instructed delegates to be on their best behavior for the television cameras, and they had complied.

Day Two would be different. Day Two was starting to spin out of control.

Indeed, the "Party of Lincoln" was ripping apart before our eyes. Arizona senator Barry Goldwater, a flinty firebrand whose ruggedly chiseled face would have rested easy on Mount Rushmore, had tapped into a mother lode of voter anxiety about Communism, crime, and especially civil rights. His followers came prepared to jettison the party's moderate wing, and they were spurred on by Goldwater's fantasy of sawing off the Eastern Seaboard to let it float out to sea. The press noted that he could win the nomination by coalescing the right and attracting fringe groups such as the John Birch Society and the Ku Klux Klan, and reporters were openly questioning whether the party was on the verge of being taken over by extremists.

So when former president Dwight D. Eisenhower stepped into the spotlight at the podium, I leaned forward intently, hoping the avuncular Ike would provide a soothing balm of rationality.

Indeed his speechwriters had crafted a temperate address that gave nods to free enterprise, a denunciation of violent radicals on the left or right, and even benign praise about America's progress on civil rights. But Eisenhower had personally and uncharacteristically inserted a couple of poison-tipped arrows into his script, and he let the first fly straight at the press: "Let us particularly scorn the divisive efforts of those outside our family—including sensation-seeking columnists and commentators—because my friends I assure you, these are people who couldn't care less about the good of our party."

The Cow Palace erupted in jeers, boos, and catcalls. Fists shot up in the air and shook angrily in the direction of the press box and broadcast anchor booths. The convention's contempt for even the most respected reporters of the day was palpable—when professorial John Chancellor of NBC News refused to surrender his floor spot to the dancing "Goldwater Girls," security guards brusquely carted him out, prompting him to wryly sign off with "This is John Chancellor, somewhere in custody."

Eisenhower, meanwhile, wasn't finished. "Let us not be guilty of maud-

lin sympathy," he bellowed, "for the criminal who, roaming the streets with the switchblade knife and illegal firearm, seeking a helpless prey, suddenly becomes, upon apprehension, a poor, underprivileged person who counts upon the compassion of our society and the laxness or weakness of too many courts to forgive his offense." Without actually uttering the word *Negroes*, the former president spoke in a code that needed no translation for those white Americans who regarded black people as an encroaching threat. Eisenhower, whether he realized it or not, seemed to be granting permission to the whites' prejudice and hatred. I suspect he was unprepared for the deafening applause, cheers, shouts, and honked Klaxons that ensued.

Louis and I warily locked eyes, neither of us willing to outwardly betray a hint of alarm. Next on the agenda were controversial platform amendments on civil rights. We had a job to do.

The satirist H. L. Mencken once observed that a national political convention often is as fascinating as a revival, or a hanging: "One sits through long sessions wishing heartily that all the delegates and alternates were dead and in hell—and then suddenly there comes a show so gaudy and hilarious, so melodramatic and obscene, so unimaginably exhilarating and preposterous, that one lives a gorgeous year in an hour."

Mencken, of course, had the luxury of being white. We did not. For Louis and me, the next hour would indeed feel like a year, but a grotesque one.

First, the entire Republican platform was read aloud—a tedious ploy to delay any ugly debate over amendments until the prime time viewing hour would be past. At 10 p.m. the first amendment was offered, condemning radical zealots such as the KKK and the Birchers. Liberal establishment icon New York governor Nelson Rockefeller, whom Goldwater had defeated for the nomination, rose to speak in the amendment's favor. "These extremists feed on fear, hate and terror," he said, as a cacophony of boos began to rise from the crowd. "They encourage disunity. These are people who have nothing in common with Americanism. The Republican Party must repudiate these people!" Enraged at him, the Goldwater crowd interrupted Rockefeller twenty-two times in five minutes, drowning him out with shrieks, noisemakers, a bass drum, and the rebuking cry, "We want Barry! We want Barry!"

While the Goldwater organization tried to keep its delegates in check on

the floor of the Cow Palace, snarling Goldwater fans in the galleries around us were off the leash. The mood turned unmistakably menacing. Even eminent campaign historian Theodore White abandoned the arena for the relative sanity of the trailers outside; he would later write that although no one in the Goldwater organization and few on the delegate floor remotely qualified as kooks, "the kooks dominated the galleries, hating and screaming and reveling in their own frenzy."

Suddenly Louis and I heard a voice yell, "Hey, look at those two up there!" The accuser pointed us out, and several spectators swarmed beneath us. "Hey niggers!" they yelled. "What the hell are you niggers doing in here?"

I could feel the hair rising on the back of my neck as I looked into faces turned scarlet and sweaty by heat and hostility. Louis, in suit and tie and perpetually dignified, turned to me and said with all the nonchalance he could muster, "Well, I think that's enough for today." Methodically we began wrapping up the cords to our bulky tape recorder and packing it and the rest of our equipment into suitcases. As we began our descent down the ramps of the Cow Palace, a self-appointed posse dangled over the railings, taunting. "Niggers!" "Get out of here, boy!" "You too, nigger bitch." "Go on, get out!" "I'm gonna kill your ass."

I stared straight ahead, putting one foot in front of the other like a soldier who would not be deterred from a mission. The throng began tossing garbage at us: wadded up convention programs, mustard-soaked hotdogs, half-eaten Snickers bars. My goal was to appear deceptively serene, mastering the mask of dispassion I had perfected since childhood to steel myself against any insults the outside world hurled my way. Then a glass soda bottle whizzed within inches of my skull. I heard it whack against the concrete and shatter. I didn't look back, but I glanced sideways at Louis and felt my lower lip begin to quiver. He was determined we would give our tormentors no satisfaction.

"If you start to cry," he muttered, "I'll break your leg."

It took an eternity for us to wend our way through the gauntlet, from the nosebleed rows of the arena down to the sea of well-coiffed whites on the ground floor. Security guards popped into my peripheral vision, but I knew better than to expect them to rescue us—that wasn't a realistic expectation for any African American in 1964. Louis and I pushed through the exit doors and into the darkness of the parking lot, dreading that our antagonists

might trail us. When at last we made it to our car, we clambered inside, locked the doors—and exhaled.

Later I would learn that the smattering of other blacks inside the Cow Palace suffered their own indignities. San Francisco dentist Henry Lucas was ejected twice from his seat. Oakland real estate entrepreneur Charles J. Patterson, then vice president of the Alameda County Republican Central Committee, was denied his rightful place at a luncheon and discovered that none of the white Republicans there would even meet his gaze. "There was no one to complain to," he would say. "The major press seemed scared of the Goldwater people." The Tennessee delegation cited race as its reason for refusing to grant a vote to its sole black delegate. And another black delegate walked out with holes singed in his best suit after a bigot sloshed him with acid.

Jackie Robinson, who had attended as a special delegate for Rockefeller, almost came to blows with a white delegate—whose wife held him back to stop him from attacking the baseball legend. "Turn him loose, lady, turn him loose," Robinson shouted, ready for retaliation himself. The next night, Goldwater would accept the GOP nomination and proclaim his signature line: "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice." Although ample evidence exists to show that Goldwater personally was not racist, he had allied himself with those who were. And he would go down to defeat in a landslide, carrying only six states: aside from his home state of Arizona, all were in the Deep South. His campaign, however, set in motion an electoral realignment because a huge number of Southern whites abandoned the Democratic Party for the GOP. His campaign also laid the foundation on which actor Ronald Reagan, having charmed the 1964 convention with a passionate speech on Goldwater's behalf, constructed a conservative "Reagan Era" that would dominate the 1980s and beyond. As for Jackie Robinson, he would always recall the GOP Convention of 1964 as one of the most unforgettable and frightening experiences of his life. "A new breed of Republican had taken over the GOP," he wrote. "As I watched this steamroller operation in San Francisco, I had a better understanding of how it must have felt to be a Jew in Hitler's Germany."

That night, as Louis and I drove back to our station—our hearts still thumping and our ears ringing with echoes of the pandemonium—I was lost in thought. I contemplated the loss of President John F. Kennedy, who

had been the first real hope for black people until he was cut down by an assassin's bullet. I recalled how only two weeks before, President Lyndon B. Johnson had signed the Civil Rights Act to prohibit racial discrimination. I thought about James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman, three idealistic civil rights workers who vanished in Mississippi that summer; their murdered bodies would later be found buried in an earthen dam. And I thought about how much easier it was to change federal policy than it would be to change the hearts and minds of America.

All too many white Americans refused to believe the harsh truth about race relations in their own country. Too many turned a blind eye to the prejudices great and small that polluted the air African Americans had to breathe every day. Hatred was a powerful force. But I wondered: could it ultimately withstand the power of the press? Journalists were beginning to bring the stories of black Americans out of the shadows of the rafters and the alleys and the backwoods, out of the sharecropper plots and the inner-city ghettos, and into the light of day. They were reporting on the cross burnings and water hosings, the beatings and lynchings, in vivid details that the public could no longer ignore.

I wanted to be one of them. I wanted to broadcast the reality of my community to those who could not otherwise imagine it, to fill in that missing perspective. I wanted to do work that mattered. I wanted to tell stories that changed the world. And if it was then inconceivable for a petite, soft-spoken black woman to ever become a journalist—much less an Emmy-winning television reporter and anchor—well, chalk that up as just one more thing in the world that was about to change.

Fast forward almost a half century, to November 2008—another pivotal presidential contest. Again, the Republicans have nominated a senator from Arizona. Again, the GOP convention has featured jeering demonstrations in support of "real Americans" and against urbanites and "media elites." This time it's the Democrats who have nominated a candidate once known as *Barry*, although he now prefers his real name, *Barack*.

Don't ever let anyone tell you history doesn't have a sense of humor. Against all odds, the Democrats nominated Barack Hussein Obama, a Harvard-trained former community organizer and law professor, and the freshman U.S. senator for Illinois. His mother was white and from Kansas;

his father was black and from Kenya. Obama became the Democratic Party standard-bearer by defeating its presumptive nominee, former first lady turned New York senator Hillary Clinton. Further proof of history's twisted wit: in high school she was one of the costumed "Goldwater Girls," from the tip of her cowboy boots to the top of her straw hat, emblazoned with the chemistry pun "AuH$_2$0"—*Au* for gold, *H$_2$0* for water.

As for me, I'm in another car driving through the night, lost in thought. The world has changed in ways I never could have envisioned. I have been a reporter for almost five decades and fortunate to report on many of the major stories of my lifetime. I've talked with five presidents. I even interviewed Goldwater in his later years, when he had grown repulsed by religious fundamentalists seizing the reigns of the right away from more libertarian conservatives like him. I've been awarded eight local Emmys and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. In my seventies, I continue to host a weekly news roundtable and special reports on KQED-TV, one of the nation's leading PBS stations. My children are grown and launched into the world; and I've been happily married for more than four decades to Bill Moore, one of the country's first African American television news cameramen.

Bill and I arrive at Harris's steakhouse in San Francisco, where an election-night dinner party is underway, hosted by our close friend and California's senior U.S. senator, Dianne Feinstein. We've talked about whether the nation could possibly elect its first black president. I don't allow myself to think it will really happen.

We mingle and finally sit down to dinner and try to follow state-by-state returns, although television reception is poor. From time to time, Dianne rises, regally clinks her knife against a glass to catch our attention, and announces the latest development. Prospects appear promising for Obama, but I refuse to let myself celebrate before CNN projects him the winner.

Even when the projection is made it is unbelievable. The sound is muffled—should we check another channel?

But no one else is hesitating. Nearly a hundred guests applaud, and more than a few jump up and down and whoop for joy. As I look around, I realize that fewer than a handful of those present are black. A lump swells in my throat, and I lean toward Bill to tell him I feel an irrepressible urge to speak publicly. He looks puzzled for a moment.

"Go on then," he encourages with a nod.

So I turn to Dianne at the next table and explain. Again she clinks her glass: "Everyone please be quiet—Belva's got something to say."

The words do not flow as much as spill out, while a movie starts to unreel itself in my mind, revealing all the highlights of my life. I tell them about my father and his big dreams. I tell them how my father was denied the right to vote; my uncle was threatened with tar and feathering; and the men of my family were ridden out of Louisiana on a rail. I tell them about my mother, the silent sufferer all her life—working in laundries, cleaning Southern Pacific trains, polishing silver for tables in a dining car where she could never dine. I talk about people, such as Louis, who had borne so much with dignity.

Not that long before, I was asked to leave news conferences because no one believed I was a real reporter; and Bill was prevented from crossing police lines to get his camera shots because no one believed he was a real news photographer. We had been among the first of our race granted television jobs in the United States.

Now, as I squeeze Bill's hand tightly and wipe away tears, I speak about the promise of America that we clung to all these many years, and how on this night that promise feels fulfilled. I want these prominent people to know that we are all witnessing a miracle—not only in politics, but in the lives of people such as me.

For several seconds after I finish, no one in the room makes a sound. Then applause begins slowly and builds. Some people are wiping away tears. Others move to embrace me or Bill or anyone else nearby. Then the real party begins.

A tall, young black man has been handing Dianne notes about the vote count all evening. I don't know Christopher Thompson, who is her D.C. chief of staff, until he introduces himself to me and requests a word in private. I follow him to a quiet corner in the hallway. As soon as we face each other, he asks, "Can I give you a big hug? I just have to touch another black person tonight!" And we throw our arms around one another in a moment as tender as it is profound.

Deep down, I suspect that this glorious glow will fade into a more complex reality. Every progressive step in America seems to evoke its own backlash. In the same way that *Brown v. Board of Education* and passage of the

Civil Rights Act helped spawn the reactionary rhetoric of the Goldwaterites, so too will Obama's election trigger angry Tea Party movement protesters branding him "un-American" and clamoring to take their country "back."

Yet I choose to remain hopeful. Over the years I've followed my mantra—a note I wrote to myself years ago. Its message applies to the fate of Belvagene Melton Davis Moore from hardscrabble Louisiana, and to the Obamas and Oprahs and Christophers of the world, and to all who follow the arc of history as it bends toward justice. It begins like this: "Don't be afraid of the space between your dreams and reality . . . "

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two

Up from Troubled Waters

I was conceived in Monroe, Louisiana, in the depths of the Great Depression, the reign of Jim Crow, and the "Flood of the Century" on the Ouachita River. My mother, a laundress who earned four dollars a week, was only fourteen years old.

Apparently if I was going to be lucky in life, I would have to be patient.

No doubt I would never have been born if my mother, Florene, had known how to resist the charms of John Melton. My father was a handsome, savvy but volatile man who swaggered his way through life, despite never having finished grammar school.

In 1932, Monroe was in dire straits, inundated when the Ouachita River crested fifty feet above flood level and gushed over the millions of sandbags futilely attempting to hold it back. By the beginning of February, more than a quarter of Monroe was submerged, and the Ouachita did not dip below flood level until mid-April. "The flood waters are contaminated beyond realization," the director of the Ouachita Parish Health Unit declared, warning that without vaccination "one is very likely to contract typhoid from merely wading and working in the flood districts." Makeshift tent cities sprang up on higher ground, as white and black families began living next to each other in a fashion that would have been unimaginable in any condition short of an emergency.

With twisted but typical Southern irony, although Monroe's blacks vastly outnumbered its white residents, whites nonetheless possessed all the political and economic power. Blacks knew all too well that their white bosses could crush them over a transgression such as knocking on the front door of a white family's house instead of the back, and that hooded Klansmen still inflicted lethal retribution against anyone they reckoned was "too uppity." It was said in Monroe that Negroes woke up every morning

fearing that they might be lynched, while whites woke up every morning fearing a Negro uprising. Given the discrimination and the demographics, neither fear was irrational.

The town sat at the rim of the Old South cotton belt, but by the early 1930s the cotton market had hit the skids and Ouachita Parish's agricultural income, payroll, and retail sales dropped by nearly two-thirds in five years. The Depression was challenging for Monroe's white citizenry but disastrous for blacks.

And if a flood was the last thing Monroe needed, I can only imagine that a baby was the last thing my mother needed. Nonetheless she delivered me that October inside my father's already overcrowded shotgun house—so named because you could shoot a bullet from the front door straight out the back door. The one-story clapboard was on obscure D Soloman's Alley, a dirt lane about twelve blocks north of the river.

The clerk who drafted my birth certificate misspelled both of my parents' names, and listed my father as a "com laborer" and my mother as a "domestic." I was given the name Belvagene, after my maternal grandfather Eugene Howard. But the ink on the document was barely dry before I was bundled up and hustled out of the lives of my overwhelmed, ill-equipped parents.

For my first few years of life, I had no clue that they had given me away. I was adopted by my Aunt Ophelia and her husband, who had a home, a spare bedroom, and an unfulfilled desire for a child of their own. I simply believed they were my real parents. I called Ophelia "Mamma" and can still remember how her hair was fashioned into finger waves in the front and flowed to her shoulders. She dressed me in organdy pinafores and doted on me—"primping," she called it. As I sat propped on her knee in front of her long dresser mirror, she would gently comb my hair and adorn it with fussy bows and colorful barrettes. "Belvagene, you're such a pretty baby," she would coo in my ear. "Just look at us—aren't we beautiful together?"

Life with her was sweet but short. I don't really recall her cough or the bloodstains on her handkerchief or anyone uttering the word "tuberculosis" in my presence. All I remember was that she was sick in bed, frail and quiet, and then she was dead.

My childhood died that day as well. I was three years old.

The unspeakable loneliness that seeped through me didn't abate even after I was returned to live with my mother and father and his family. They were in

a different, larger house than before, but it was filled with even more people. Our home was a frenetic place, with relatives perpetually moving in or out depending on whether they had secured a job. I no longer had a room or a bed—instead I slept on a blanket pallet on the floor. Curiously, although my mother and father lived in the house, I don't remember them ever playing with me or even acknowledging my existence. Perhaps they feared that I carried Aunt Ophelia's deadly disease. More likely, they were preoccupied with their prized new baby, my brother John Jr.

All I know is that overnight I went from being blissful to miserable. I cried every day until my eyeballs were raw and my stomach ached from the sobs. People in that house pretty much stepped around me and went about their business.

My father was the head of the household, overseeing the welfare of his mother, four sisters, and younger brother—his own father had abandoned the family and taken a new wife across the state line into Arkansas. A child himself when he was forced to go to work at the local sawmill, my father used encyclopedias to teach himself to read. He was intoxicated by knowledge and could recite a trove of trivia, including the names of state capitals and lengths of North American rivers. His secret weapon was *The Old Farmer's Almanac*, which he attempted to memorize verbatim.

At the mill, he smartly made himself indispensable by tackling and mastering the most intricate and treacherous saw machinery. As a result, he earned thirty dollars a week, which was a mighty high Depression-era salary for a black man in Northern Louisiana.

His youth, quick reaction time, and keen intellect protected him: many less fortunate coworkers left severed fingers and hands on the mill floor. His intellect protected him in other ways as well. He used the weekend as a tension valve, blowing off steam in Five Points, a three-block area of "colored town" owned by the same influential white family who owned the lumber mill. The money the owners paid their workers came back to the owners via the gambling dens and saloons they operated. My father's carousing and brawling in Five Points landed him in jail on a regular basis.

He was smart enough to know he wouldn't be there long. Miraculously, an anonymous benefactor—no doubt looking out for the interests of the sawmill—always managed to secure his release every Monday morning just in the knick of time for the start of his mill shift.

My father had an explosive temper: in particularly foul moods, he was

known to whip out his pistol—but everyone generally regarded "Johnnie" as a big bluffer who merely wanted to be the epicenter of attention. One way he got noticed was by joining gospel quartets. The quartets afforded him the chance to perform in sanctuaries and town halls, and to flirt with adoring young women who sat and flapped paper fans that depicted Jesus as the Good Shepherd on one side and advertised the local funeral home on the other. Gospel singing also gave him an excuse to spend part of his paycheck on snazzy suits and to slick his hair back with cans of Murray's Superior Hair Pomade. John Melton was a man who savored the ladies' attention.

My mother didn't much care for my father's extracurricular "spreading of the gospel," but she couldn't do much about it. She was a beauty herself—I used to open my candy bars to see if any of the colors of the chocolate that covered them were as pretty as the rich mocha tone of my mother's skin. She had wide-set eyes that seldom looked directly at you, but her downcast glances showed off her long, curled lashes.

Like almost all the women in my family, my mother worked for G.B. Cooley's Monroe Steam Laundry. At any given time in the 1930s, the laundry employed more than a hundred black women as laundresses. Their job was to scrub, wring dry, starch, and iron the shirts and dresses and even bedsheets of well-to-do whites. The workday was long, air-conditioning was nonexistent, the sticky heat and humidity were stifling—and for their labors, they earned less than a seventh of the pay my father received.

As for me, I tried hard to make myself useful, as though to justify my presence. Often I was sent off to deliver messages or packages to my father at the mill or to another relative's home. As simple as that sounds, I found such errands terrifying, because I was compelled to cross a lumberyard infested with huge rats. As I made my way through the maze of wood stacks, I could hear them scampering about and would catch glimpses of their beady eyes or twitching tails. At sundown, a trek across the lumberyard was a passage through my own private chamber of horrors.

I also came in handy when my maternal grandmother suffered a stroke and moved in with the Melton family. The adults would get her out of bed in the morning and position her in the rocking chair on the porch. I heard some of the grown-ups say that my grandmother adored spending time with me after my birth—I was her first grandchild. Now, my job was to sit holding her hand, help her to the bathroom, fetch her a drink of water or a

sandwich, and keep her company. We were an odd, forlorn pair: she was unable to speak, rocking and humming for hours on end; and I was at her side watching her and hoping someone would pass down our street and wave at us, to bestow a grace note of excitement on the dull day.

The truth is that my family really didn't know quite what to do with me, nor did they seem to have much space in their home or hearts for a sad little girl. So I became portable—rather like an old suitcase that they would pass from place to place.

Sometimes they would send me to stay for weeks with my Grandpa Eugene in Rayville. Grandpa was what my father called a jackleg preacher—a self-ordained reverend with no education or training in the ministry. When I had outstayed my welcome at Grandpa's, I would be dispatched to Mississippi to visit my great-aunt Issaquena. Her shack wasn't accessible by any road—instead we had to drive across a meadow, undo the wires of a fence and roll it back, and then bump across the rutty terrain into the middle of nowhere.

I'm pretty sure if you had looked up the word *recluse* in a Delta dictionary, you would have found a tintype photograph of Issaquena. Resembling an Indian, she always wore men's clothes and fastened her long hair in a single braid down her back. Her house tottered on rickety stilts near a fishing stream, and she kept a loaded shotgun by her door. I detested the snakes that slithered around her place, and I dreaded every trip to her outhouse; but otherwise I actually enjoyed my time with Issaquena. She would let me trail behind her as she gathered wood or weeded the garden, and sometimes we would sit by the stream monitoring our fishing lines, simply waiting for something to happen.

We ate nothing that she hadn't grown or killed herself. The only staples she required from the outside world were flour and lard, which my parents would deliver whenever they retrieved me.

By the time I was five, I had returned to Monroe with renewed optimism. My buoyancy had nothing to do with Monroe's having recovered from the 1932 flood or with the town then weathering the Depression better than the rest of the Delta. A huge natural gas discovery boosted its industries—carbon black plants, saw mills, and paper mills—and through the rest of the decade the town was cushioned, its white citizenry comfortable. I had no idea that that Monroe's city fathers had installed the first publicly owned

streetcar line in the country, nor did I know that Delta Air Lines had been organized in the boardroom of Central Savings Bank and Trust on Desiard Street.

My newfound optimism sprang from the fact that I had a mission: to maneuver my way into someone's heart and home. And I sized up my mother's childless older sister, Aunt Pearline, as my most promising prospect.

Pearline and her feisty husband, my Uncle Ezra, had recently fulfilled their dream of opening a small grocery store. They had stocked rough plank shelves with canned goods and dried staples, and they were extending credit to people like them who strained paycheck to paycheck. In those days, a trip into a white-owned market was an exercise in humiliation: if a black customer was checking out and a white customer approached, the black shopper was obliged to reload her basket and go to the end of the line, sometimes over and over again. Our neighbors agreed it was time for a black-owned market in our midst.

Again, I strategized ways to make myself useful. I volunteered to deliver groceries to the few customers who owned telephones and thus could call in their orders; and I also picked up grocery lists and shopped for customers who were shut-ins. Eventually my aunt and uncle took me in, and I moved into the second of two rooms behind their store. The three of us felt like a real family.

I called Aunt Pearline "Tee." Like my mother and the rest of her sisters, she was frugal with conversation. The woman didn't chitchat; she sang. I could decipher her moods by the hymn of the day. "I Know the Lord Done Heard My Cry" indicated something was wrong. "Ain't That Good News" or "In the Great Gettin' Up Morning" meant it was a good day to ask her for just about anything.

Her church was the anchor of her existence. She saw to it that I attended Sunday worship, Sunday school, Wednesday night prayer meeting, and Saturday night children's programs at Zion Traveler Baptist Church. Sometimes I would sing for the children's talent show, and adults would toss pennies onto the stage to show their approval. I made a point of always donating my pennies by dropping them in the offering plate—my aunt would beam with pride. I would like to think I was a generous child, but I suspect my motivation had a lot more to do with making sure my aunt loved me better so she would keep me.

Aunt Pearline was one of Zion Traveler's "Mothers"—a group of women who aided the pastor, counseled the flock, and provided spiritual guidance to those who had lost their way. Although many of the Mothers were virtually illiterate, they could recite an impressive host of New Testament verses. Once a month, these women would march to the front of the church, in white outfits reminiscent of nurses' uniforms, to be recognized for their special role. One of their responsibilities was to prepare candidates for baptism in the Ouachita River.

As soon as I could, I declared Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and asked to be baptized. That testimony would become a lifelong faith, bolstering my courage and assuring me that, regardless of the circumstances of my birth, I remain a child of God, wanted and loved unconditionally. Aunt Pearline was thrilled with my decision, and she and the other Mothers went to work sewing old bedsheets into flowing white robes that we baptismal candidates would don for our journey through the river and into salvation.

Being led into the Ouachita is one of the most vivid memories of my young life. One Sunday, as soon as the church service concluded on a final round of *Amens*, we all marched blocks down to the riverbank. The Mothers walked alongside us and sang hymns; and as we neared our salvation spot, they took up the chorus, "Wa-aade in the water, wade in the water, children, wa-aade in the water. God's gonna trouble the water . . . "

My young mind suddenly focused on the lyrics, and I panicked. What did that mean, troubling the waters? Just what exactly was God going to do? But I had little time for hesitation: the pastor already was standing far from the bank when two deacons held me under my arms and solemnly carried me into the Ouachita. My body shivered from apprehension and chill as we approached the pastor. The water was at my chin, and my bare feet could no longer touch the river bottom. "Oh Lord," the pastor intoned, "cleanse this child's soul." I sucked in my breath when the deacons tilted my body backward and the current began to cover me. "I baptize you in the name of the Father . . ." Then I lost his voice as my head was dunked under water.

Just when I thought I must be on my final journey to Heaven, a cool breeze hit my face and I could inhale again, secure in the knowledge that my sinful soul was cleansed. I had been saved for eternity, and my Aunt Pearline cried with joy.

Life was pretty good. I had begun attending Miss Bessie's Brooks

Academy, a private school for Protestant Negro girls—my father boasted of what it cost him to send me to that school, which was a conspicuous symbol of affluence in our community. I was learning to read and write, speak well, and practice proper etiquette.

Unfortunately, I was about to discover how God was going to trouble the waters.

Because our grocery store was not yet sufficiently profitable, my Uncle Ezra had retained his grueling job at the Armour Meat Packing Company. One day he was hit hard by a swinging side of beef, injuring his back so severely that he could no longer work. Without Ezra's weekly paycheck, my aunt and uncle were forced to shutter the market they had worked so hard to establish; and they moved us all back into the already jam-packed Melton house.

So my uncle did something unheard of in Monroe, Louisiana: he sued the company. My relatives warned him that he was crazy—no colored person had ever sued a white company in Monroe. Amazingly, he found a young white lawyer to take his case; and even more incredible, a Louisiana judge found in his favor and ordered Armour to pay him two thousand dollars in damages. We were overjoyed—but it was like licking syrup from a serrated knife. Ezra's lawyer came to alert him that, according to the talk of the town, Monroe's white businessmen had no intention of letting him collect a dime. Instead they were plotting to make an example of him with tar and feathering.

Fear ricocheted through our entire extended family, and with justification. Twenty-one blacks already had died at the end of ropes in Monroe; and while the last lynching had been in 1919, it was seared into adult memories as though it were only yesterday. My father took charge. All the men in the family were determined to be in imminent danger by association and would have to leave immediately. They scattered into the night in various vehicles. Ezra hopped a freight train to keep him off the roads.

I don't know why the men chose to rendezvous in California, except that it was far, far from Louisiana.

As for me, eventually I was packed up and farmed out yet again—this time in the company of my little brother—to our paternal grandfather Horace Melton and his wife, in El Dorado, Arkansas. I'm certain our stepgrandmother had a name, but we knew her only as "The Lady with the

Switch" because of her penchant for whipping us for the petty crimes of childhood. She had no children of her own, and thus she could never fathom why two youngsters couldn't keep the red clay of Arkansas off their shoes and out of her immaculate house. We would watch in utter trepidation as she broke a branch off the peach tree in her backyard, rubbed her hand up to strip off the leaves, and then called us to bend over and brace ourselves. She played no favorites in her house. The welts on our young skin never healed before another offense would inspire a fresh whipping.

I hoped desperately for a rescue. I wasn't sure anybody cared enough to reclaim me, but I secretly counted on the strength of my father's love for my brother motivating him to come get us both. Within half a year he did.

The segregated train bound for California had no seat for me, so I sat on the floor on top of my suitcase and silently prayed about my new life. I knew that God loved me and Jesus loved me. But I also wanted somebody down here to love me—and it didn't seem like too much to ask.

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