

MEMPHIS



A NOVEL

TARA M.
STRINGFELLOW

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[North Family Tree](#)

Part I

- [1. Joan 1995](#)
- [2. Miriam 1995](#)
- [3. Miriam 1978](#)
- [4. August 1978](#)
- [5. Miriam 1995](#)
- [6. Joan 1995](#)
- [7. Miriam 1995](#)
- [8. Miriam 1988](#)
- [9. August 1988](#)
- [10. Joan 1995](#)
- [11. August 1995](#)

Part II

- [12. Joan 1997](#)
- [13. Hazel 1937](#)
- [14. Hazel 1943](#)
- [15. August 1997](#)

- [16. Hazel 1955](#)
- [17. August 1978](#)
- [18. Miriam 1997](#)
- [19. Hazel 1955](#)

[Part III](#)

- [20. Joan 2001](#)
- [21. Joan 2002](#)
- [22. Miriam 2001](#)
- [23. Joan 2003](#)
- [24. August 2001](#)
- [25. Miriam 1968](#)
- [26. Joan 2001](#)
- [27. August 2001](#)
- [28. Hazel 1968](#)
- [29. Miriam 2001](#)
- [30. Hazel 1985](#)
- [31. Miriam 2003](#)
- [32. Joan 2003](#)

[*Dedication*](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

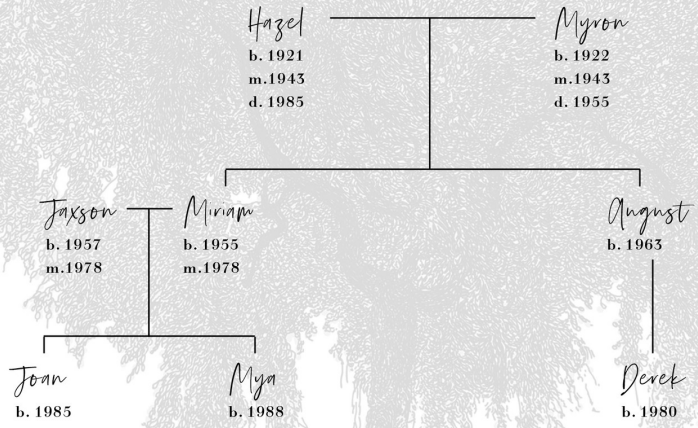
For years in this country there was no one for black men to vent their rage on except black women. And for years black women accepted that rage—even regarded that acceptance as their unpleasant duty. But in doing so, they frequently kicked back, and they seem never to have become the “true slave” that white women see in their own history. True, the black woman did the housework, the drudgery; true, she reared the children, often alone, but she did all of that while occupying a place on the job market, a place her mate could not get or which his pride would not let him accept. And she had nothing to fall back on: not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself.

—TONI MORRISON, “WHAT THE BLACK WOMAN THINKS ABOUT WOMEN’S LIB,” *THE NEW YORK TIMES*, 1971

The South got something to say.

—ANDRÉ 3000, OUTKAST, *SOURCE AWARDS*, 1995

North Family Tree



Part 1



CHAPTER 1

Joan

1995

The house looked living. Mama squeezed my hand as the three of us gazed up at it, our bleary exhaustion no match for the animated brightness before us.

“Papa Myron selected and placed each stone of the house’s foundation himself,” she whispered to me and Mya. “With the patience and diligence of a man deep in love.”

The low house was a cat napping in the shade of plum trees, not at all like the three-story Victorian fortress we had just left. This house seemed somehow large and small at once—it sat on many different split levels that spanned out in all directions in a wild, Southern maze. A long driveway traversed the length of the yard, cut in half by a folding wooden barn gate. But what made the house breathe, what gave the house its lungs, was its front porch. Wide stone steps led to a front porch covered in heavy green ivy and honeysuckle and morning glory. Above the porch, my grandfather had erected a wooden pergola. Sunlight streaked through green vines and wooden planks that turned the porch into an unkempt greenhouse. The honeysuckle drew hummingbirds the size of baseballs; they fluttered atop the canopy in shades of indigo and emerald and burgundy. I could see cats

on the porch—a dozen of them, maybe, an impossible number except for what a quick count told me. Some slept in heaps that looked softer than down, while others sat atop the green canopy, paws swiping at the birds. Bees as big as hands buzzed about, pollinating the morning glories, giving the yard a feeling that the green expanse itself was alive and humming and moving. The butterflies are what solidified my fascination. Small and periwinkle-blue, they danced within the canopy. The butterflies were African violets come alive. It was the finishing touch to a Southern symphony all conducted on a quarter-acre plot.

“Not now, Joan,” Mama said, sighing.

I had out my pocket sketchbook, was already fumbling for the piece of charcoal somewhere in the many pockets of my Levi overalls. My larger sketchbook, my blank canvases the size of teacups, my brushes and inks and oils were all packed tight in the car. But my smaller sketchbook, I kept on me. At all times. Everywhere I went.

I wanted to capture the life of the front porch, imprint it in my notebook and in my memory. A quick landscape. Should’ve only taken a few minutes, but Mama was right. We were all dog tired. Even Wolf, who had slept most of the journey. Mya’s face was drained of its usual spark, and as I slipped my sketchbook into my back pocket, slightly defeated, her hand felt hot and limp as I took it in my own.

Mya, Mama, and I walked up the wide stone front steps hand in hand. My memories of staying here felt vague and far away—I’d been only three years old, and it felt like a lifetime ago—but now I remembered sitting on the porch and pouring milk for the cats. I remembered Mama cautioning me not to spill, though I usually did anyway. Her laughter, too—the sound of it like the seashell chimes coming from inside the house while I played with the cats echoed in my mind from years ago. And the door, I remembered that. It was a massive beast. A gilded lion’s head with a gold hoop in its snout was mounted on a wood door painted corn yellow. I had to paint a picture of this door, even if I had to spend months, years, finding the perfect hues. It was as magnificent as it was terrifying. By knocking, by opening the door, I knew we’d be letting out a whole host of ghosts.

Mama raised her arm, grabbed the lion's hoop, and knocked three times.

A calico kitten wove in and out of Mya's legs in a zigzag, meowing softly.

Mya let go of my hand in order to stroke the kitten's mane, coo to her gently.

We'd left Wolf in the car. Mama explained she'd have to be let in through the backyard, so she wouldn't be tempted to attack all the roaming wildlife in the front. She was in the passenger seat with the window down. She wouldn't jump out; she was too big for that. More mammoth than dog. And even though she was friendlier than a church mouse to all dogs, she mistrusted all humans not family. The curl of her lip and the baring of teeth were enough to send most grown men running to the other side of the street. As a baby, Mya called her "Horse" instead of "Wolf." Wolf would carry her, Mya tugging at her ears like reins, and Wolf never minding. Mya's chubby toddler legs all akimbo in Wolf's thick mane. Wolf grew to expect it, these pony rides. She would nudge Mya first with a face-covering, eye-closing lick, followed by a gentle nip on Mya's button nose that let us know she was ready to be ridden.

Now Wolf stuck her thick head covered in gray fur out the van window and growled, low. She sensed the front door opening before we did. Just as Mama lifted a hand to knock again, the yellow door opened to reveal Auntie August. Her hair was pinned up in big pink rollers, the kind I'd seen in old pinup-girl photos, and she wore a long, cream-colored silk kimono. Embroidered along the front panels were sunset-colored cranes taking off from a green pool. The kimono appeared like it'd been tied in a rush: A beet-purple man's necktie held the fabric haphazardly together, barely concealing the full breasts and hips aching to break from the folds. My auntie stood blinking at the bright morning light, an expression of resignation and exhaustion on her face that made her look just like Mama.

"What war y'all lost?" Auntie August asked.

My aunt looked like the taller, more regal version of Mama. Auntie August was nearly six feet tall. I had read Anansi stories. I knew that it was the women tall as trees and fiercer than God that ancient villages often sent

into battle. If Mama was Helen of Troy, August was Asafo. She seemed to go on forever, seemed to be the height of the door itself. She had hips, the kind Grecian sculptors would spend months chiseling, big and bold and wide. Her skin was noticeably darker, darker than mine even, and I felt a welt of pride. I had always coveted darker-skinned women their color. There was a mystery to their beauty that I found hypnotizing, Siren-like. They were hardly ever in *Jet* or *Ebony* or *Essence*, the magazines we subscribed to, unless they themselves were famous—the mom from *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, Whoopi Goldberg, Jackie Joyner, Oprah. Most of the Black women the public pronounced beautiful looked like Mama. Black Barbies. Bright. Hair wavier than curly. Petite figures. So, when my Auntie August opened that door, and I saw that her skin was so dark it reflected all the other colors surrounding it—the yellow of the morning light, the yellow of the door, the peach tan of the calico cat weaving in and out of Mya’s short legs—I knew that the aunt I could barely remember was, in and of herself, a small, delicious miracle.

“Got any food in the fridge?” Mama asked.

August opened the door wider, taking in the spectacle before her. “Is the pope Catholic?”

Mama shrugged.

I could hear Wolf growl again over the hum and buzz of the bees and the hummingbirds.

“My word,” August said in a whisper then. “Did it get that bad?”

“I’ll take my old room if I can have it,” Mama said.

Auntie August fumbled into the deep silk folds of her kimono, her face momentarily scrunched in mild annoyance. Like she had an itch she couldn’t quite reach. From out of her robe’s pocket came the unmistakable green-and-white packaging of a pack of Kools, and the relief was visible in Auntie August’s face. That pack of smokes. I felt a pang, sharp in my ribs, like one of them was missing. Daddy had smoked Kools. Would religiously pull out the green-and-white carton and smack it against his knee a few times before removing and lighting a cigarette and asking if Mya and I wanted to hear another ghost story.

In a series of deft movements, August removed a cigarette and positioned a lighter in her other hand, ready to strike. She motioned with her cigarette, first at Mya, then at me. “And them girls?” Her glance seemed to rest longer on me than on Mya.

“Together. In the quilting room,” Mama said, with a sharpness to her voice that almost sounded defensive, but with something else there I couldn’t place.

August, with the quickness of a serpent, reached out her hand and grasped Mama’s chin in her palm, turned her face this way and that.

“The foundation don’t match,” she said.

Auntie August lost her swagger then. A flash of rage quickly turned to tears, and her face broke down like Mya’s when she was told not to open her graham crackers directly in the grocery store. August reached for Mama, and all near six feet of August collapsed, leaned like a weary palm tree into her sister’s arms.

“What hell you been through, Meer?” August asked, sobbing into Mama’s hair.

“Mama, who them?”

The voice was male. Not adult, but on the crisp cusp of it, burgeoning with masculinity. It shocked us. We hadn’t heard a male voice in days except for Al Green’s over the radio and that white man at the gas station a half day’s drive back. It was like a predator had suddenly announced its presence in our new safe haven.

A boy, almost as tall as August but with a body slender and young, stepped into the doorframe, blocking the entry.

He didn’t look like us. He didn’t have the high cheekbones, the slightly upturned top lip, the massive forehead everyone else related to me had. He had a copper hue to his skin that seemed slightly foreign to me, like meeting someone from an entirely different tribe.

But I recognized him. My cousin Derek. And in that split second, I also remembered what he had done to me—a memory I’d forgotten after all these years suddenly coming for me with a force I was powerless to stop.

“Derek,” Auntie August said, exhaling her cigarette, “these here your cousins. That’s Mya,” she said, pointing with her cigarette. “Mya was a newborn last y’all was here. And that there is Joan.”

“Derek, you as tall as your mama. How old are you now?” Mama asked.

“Fifteen,” he said and puffed out his chest.

“A man almost,” Mama said, quiet.

On the drive to Memphis, I had noticed deer grazing in the woods, right alongside the highway. While we were eating tuna sandwiches atop a park bench at a rest stop west of Knoxville, high in the Smoky Mountains, a family of deer had walked right up to our table. Mama placed a pointed finger over her mouth to signal silence. We said nothing, but I sat open-mouthed as Mya fearlessly, gracefully, extended an apple slice. A young doe had plucked it like Eve must have that apple. Without much thought at all. Simple desire. Later, in the car, Mama had explained that deer will walk right up to you if you’re silent, or on horseback. They really only fear us when we’re hunting them. But if you’re silent among them, it’s almost like you’re invisible. You blend in with the nature around the deer.

Seeing Derek now, I wanted to disappear into the flora and the fauna of the front porch and yard. The cats hunting the birds, the hummingbirds competing with the bees for honeysuckle—that all made sense to me. There was a logical order to the chaos. But no one, not even God, could sit there and explain to me why that boy had held me down on the floor of his bedroom seven years before.

August leaned back from Mama, taking shaky breaths. “Well, come on in, y’all,” she said, with a new warmth in her voice that their embrace had seemed to kindle in her. “We standing out here like y’all some salesmen, like we ain’t kin. Come on, I’ll warm something up. Made lamb chops last night. Y’all welcome to it,” August said, drying her eyes on the sleeves of her kimono. Her hands trembled slightly with emotion as she finally lit her waiting cigarette.

“It’s Friday,” Mama said. Her voice sounded small, exhausted.

“So?” Derek asked.

August smacked Derek hard on the back of the head. “Watch who you talk to. And how. Meer, y’all going to eat meat, eat your fill today, so help me God.” Derek slipped past her, into the dark room beyond the door.

I would not, could not, move.

“Joanie?” Mama asked. “You all right?”

Suddenly, I felt Mama’s hands on my shoulders, and I jumped almost a foot in the air.

Auntie August paused on the threshold, one foot inside.

I couldn’t seem to move my eyes from the darkness of the hallway behind her, not even to look at Mama. The blackness started to overtake my vision; I realized, vaguely, that I was holding my breath. He was in there, somewhere. From the inside, I heard a grandfather clock strike a half hour.

“The girl don’t speak?” Auntie August asked.

My heart was pounding in my ears. Then—

“My God,” August said, clasping one hand to her mouth. She pointed her lit cigarette at my pant leg.

The lion’s snout on the door appeared to sneer at me. I felt paralyzed, as if I’d live the rest of my life standing in this spot on the front porch until I grew ivy myself and became just another vine for the bees to explore. The bees—the buzzing came from far away now. I realized, as if from a distance, that the volume of the whole world seemed to have been turned down. Except for the warning sound of my heart pounding.

“Joanie?” Mama spun me around so hard I nearly stumbled. Her big eyes had flecks of yellow in them that caught the sun streaking in between the vines, the sudden brightness assaulting my eyes. I felt warmth all down my left leg, a wet heat that was quickly going cold. It was pee, I realized, feeling vaguely surprised, as if I were observing someone else’s body, someone else’s life. I didn’t even feel embarrassed. Mama shook me hard.

“She’s just exhausted,” she said, now looking into my eyes. “We had a long trip.” I felt Mya’s eyes on me, watchful.

“Well, y’all home now,” Auntie August said, her voice slightly higher than before. It sounded almost like a question, or maybe a prayer.

“Come on now, Joanie,” Mama said softly, in the same voice I remembered her using to soothe Mya when she was only a baby. “Let’s get you cleaned up.” In a louder voice now, as if answering a question, she said, “Mya, you go on ahead.”

Auntie August held out a hand. Mya looked at me, then Mama, then me again, then took our aunt’s hand and began to follow her inside.

It seemed impossible to ever move again. I thought I would die right there. I even hoped to. Except...Mya.

“Come on, Joanie.” Mya had turned back. Mya. My baby sister. Seven years old and yet, unafraid. Something small sparked back to life within me. I might not be able to move an inch for myself, but for Mya...I forced myself to take one step and then another. I would not let her walk in there without me. I had to, at the very least, be a fortress for Mya.

I entered, Mama’s hands still on my shoulders.

Inside, the parlor was a continuation of the front porch. There was foliage everywhere. Black wallpaper with hand-painted pink peonies covered the tall walls and mounted to a high octagonal beam in the center of the room. The windows were the kind I’d seen in old Mafia movies set in Chicago, corners lined with stained glass that was flecked with intricate emerald vines and purple violets, casting the room in a gem-studded light. After adjusting to the melody of dark and light, the contrast of the black wallpaper with the brightness of the painted peonies, the morning sunlight hitting the stained-glass windows just right, so that the ivy vines danced upon the floor in a rainbow of light—my eyes took in the furniture. The room was filled with antiques: a pearl-handled rotary phone that rested atop a small Victorian-looking maid’s table; mason jars filled with stuffed yellow birds; the same blue butterflies I’d seen outside, but pinned on parchment and framed in glass; a Victrola; a piano.

“Wow,” Mya let out.

A worn-in Persian rug stretched out before us toward a brick fireplace. That’s where Derek stood.

Derek’s gaze moved in three quick motions: at me, down to my wet pants, and then down further to the floor, where they stayed. I saw now that

he had the same deerlike eyes as the rest of us. Proof that he was our kin. I hated that fact. That he belonged to us—to me. Bile crept into my belly, and I swallowed hard to hold it in.

As Derek's eyes turned toward me, I saw that he looked different and familiar at the same time. He wore his hair in a short fade that I hated to admit was becoming on him.

“Oh, look at all the old furniture!” Mya exclaimed and was gone. She ran into the dark recesses and crannies of the parlor and the adjoining hallway, off exploring. As brave as she was, she was still seven. She lived for hiding in a good cabinet.

Left to ourselves in the octagonal room, Mama stood behind me, and August stood behind her son. No one spoke for what seemed like an eon.

Silence settled into the room like a dense fog. I could feel my own hot blood burning and coursing through my veins. Felt the cold dampness of my pant leg.

“We should probably get cleaned up first,” Mama said and guided me, gently, to the bathroom.

It was strange, that I'd peed myself without realizing it. But more than the pee turning cold on my leg, more than the swelling dizziness and sickening twists of my stomach, more than any shame sensed, I felt an entirely new emotion. As my mother helped undress me with a gentleness that only increased my fear, I understood then why the first sin on this earth had been a murder. Among kin.