

COMING OF AGE IN MISSISSIPPI

by **ANNE MOODY**

Also Available from Laurel:

ON ICE / Eldridge Cleaver

JAMES BALDWIN: ARTIST ON FIRE /
W. J. Weatherby

By James Baldwin:

THE AMEN CORNER

THE DEVIL FINDS WORK

GIOVANNI'S ROOM

GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN

IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK

JUST ABOVE MY HEAD

NO NAME IN THE STREET

ONE DAY, WHEN I WAS LOST

TELL ME HOW LONG THE TRAIN'S BEEN GONE

(1968)

LAUREL



age and the boys a bit younger. They often rode their bikes or skated down the little hill just in front of our house. Adline, Junior and I would sit and watch them. How we wished Mama could buy us a bike or even a pair of skates to share.

There was a wide trench running from the street along-side our house. It separated our house and the Johnsons' place from a big two-story house up on the hill. A big pecan tree grew on our side of the trench, and we made our play-house under it so we could sit in the trench and watch those white children without their knowing we were actually out there staring at them. Our playhouse consisted of two apple crates and a tin can that we sat on.

One day when the white children were riding up and down the street on their bikes, we were sitting on the apple crates making Indian noises and beating the tin can with sticks. We sounded so much like Indians that they came over to ask if that was what we were. This was the beginning of our friendship. We taught them how to make sounds and dance like Indians and they showed us how to ride their bikes and skate. Actually, I was the only one who learned. Adline and Junior were too small and too scared, although they got a kick out of watching us. I was seven, Adline five, and Junior three, and this was the first time we had ever had other children to play with. Sometimes, they would take us over to their playhouse. Katie and Bill, the children of the whites that owned the furniture store, had a model playhouse at the side of their parents' house. That little house was just like the big house, painted snow white on the outside, with real furniture in it. I enjoyed their playhouse more than I did their bikes and skates. Here they were playing in a house that was nicer than any house I could have dreamed of living in. They had all this to offer me and I had nothing to offer them but the field of clover in summer and the apple crates under the pecan tree.

The Christmas after we moved there, I thought sure Mama would get us some skates. But she didn't. We didn't get anything but a couple of apples and oranges. I cried a week for those skates, I remember.

Every Saturday evening Mama would take us to the movies. The Negroes sat upstairs in the balcony and the

CHAPTER 3

That white lady Mama was working for worked her so hard that she always came home griping about backaches. Every night she'd have to put a red rubber bottle filled with hot water under her back. It got so bad that she finally quit. The white lady was so mad she couldn't get Mama to stay that the next day she told Mama to leave to make room for the new maid.

This time we moved two miles up the same road. Mama had another domestic job. Now she worked from breakfast to supper and still made five dollars a week. But these people didn't work Mama too hard and she wasn't as tired as before when she came home. The people she worked for were nice to us. Mrs. Johnson was a schoolteacher. Mr. Johnson was a rancher who bought and sold cattle. Mr. Johnson's mother, an old lady named Miss Ola, lived with them.

Our house, which was separated from the Johnsons' by a field of clover, was the best two-room house we had been in yet. It was made out of big new planks and it even had a new toilet. We were also once again on paved streets. We just did make those paved streets, though. A few yards past the Johnsons' house was the beginning of the old rock road we had just moved off.

We were the only Negroes in that section, which seemed like some sort of honor. All the whites living around there were well-to-do. They ranged from schoolteachers to doctors and prosperous businessmen. The white family living across the street from us owned a funeral home and the only furniture store in Centreville. They had two children, a boy and a girl. There was another white family living about a quarter of a mile in back of the Johnsons who also had a boy and a girl. The two white girls were about my

whites sat downstairs. One Saturday we arrived at the movies at the same time as the white children. When we saw each other, we ran and met. Katie walked straight into the downstairs lobby and Adline, Junior, and I followed. Mama was talking to one of the white women and didn't notice that we had walked into the white lobby. I think she thought we were at the side entrance we had always used which led to the balcony. We were standing in the white lobby with our friends, when Mama came in and saw us. "C'mon! C'mon!" she yelled, pushing Adline face on into the door. "Essie Mae, um gonna try my best to kill you when I get you home. I told you 'bout running up in these stores and things like you own 'em!" she shouted, dragging me through the door. When we got outside, we stood there crying, and we could hear the white children crying inside the white lobby. After that, Mama didn't even let us stay at the movies. She carried us right home.

All the way back to our house, Mama kept telling us that we couldn't sit downstairs, we couldn't do this or that with white children. Up until that time I had never really thought about it. After all, we were playing together. I knew that we were going to separate schools and all, but I never knew why.

After the movie incident, the white children stopped playing in front of our house. For about two weeks we didn't see them at all. Then one day they were there again and we started playing. But things were not the same. I had never really thought of them as white before. Now all of a sudden they were white, and their whiteness made them better than me. I now realized that not only were they better than me because they were white, but everything they owned and everything connected with them was better than what was available to me. I hadn't realized before that downstairs in the movies was any better than upstairs. But now I saw that it was. Their whiteness provided them with a pass to downstairs in that nice section and my blackness sent me to the balcony.

Now that I was thinking about it, their schools, homes, and streets were better than mine. They had a large red brick school with nice sidewalks connecting the buildings. Their homes were large and beautiful with indoor toilets and every other convenience that I knew of at the time.

Every house I had ever lived in was a one- or two-room shack with an outdoor toilet. It really bothered me that they had all these nice things and we had nothing. "There is a secret to it besides being white," I thought. Then my mind got all wrapped up in trying to uncover that secret.

One day when we were all playing in our playhouse in the ditch under the pecan tree, I got a crazy idea. I thought the secret was their "privates." I had seen everything they had but their privates and it wasn't any different than mine. So I made up a game called "The Doctor." I had never been to a doctor myself. However, Mama had told us that a doctor was the only person that could look at children's naked bodies besides their parents. Then I remembered the time my Grandma Winnie was sick. When I asked her what the doctor had done to her she said, "He examined me." Then I asked her about "examined" and she told me he looked at her teeth, in her ears, checked her heart, blood and privates. Now I was going to be the doctor. I had all of them, Katie, Bill, Sandra, and Paul plus Adline and Junior take off their clothes and stand in line as I sat on one of the apple crates and examined them. I looked in their mouths and ears, put my ear to their hearts to listen for their heartbeats. Then I had them lie down on the leaves and I looked at their privates. I examined each of them about three times, but I didn't see any differences. I still hadn't found that secret.

That night when I was taking my bath, soaping myself all over, I thought about it again. I remembered the day I had seen my two uncles Sam and Walter. They were just as white as Katie them. But Grandma Winnie was darker than Mama, so how could Sam and Walter be white? I must have been thinking about it for a long time because Mama finally called out, "'Essie Mae! Stop using up all that soap! And hurry up so Adline and Junior can bathe 'fore that water gits cold."

"Mama," I said, "why ain't Sam and Walter white?"

"'Cause they mama ain't white," she answered.

"But you say a long time ago they daddy is white."

"If the daddy is white and the mama is colored, then that don't make the children white."

"But they got the same hair and color like Bill and Katie them got," I said.

"That still don't make them white! Now git out of that tub!" she snapped.

Every time I tried to talk to Mama about white people she got mad. Now I was more confused than before. If it wasn't the straight hair and the white skin that made you white, then what was it?

In the summer Mr. Johnson would drive down to Florida in a big trailer truck and bring it back running over with watermelons. Then he would sell them to the stores and markets in Centreville and nearby towns. Often Mrs. Johnson would go with him now that school was out and she wasn't teaching. When she went, I would stay with Miss Ola.

Miss Ola was a very nice old lady. She would bake cookies, candy or something for us every Saturday. She had a little bell that she used to ring for us to come over when she had cooked us something or wanted one of us to help her in the yard. We always sat out in the clover on Saturdays and listened for that little bell. I learned to like Miss Ola even more when I started staying with her at night. She liked me very much too and we had lots of fun together when I was there.

Mrs. Johnson had a shaky little rollaway bed that I was supposed to sleep on in the dining room which was right next to Miss Ola's room. I never did sleep much on it, though. Before going to bed I had a hundred chores to do for Miss Ola. First, I had to scratch her white hair and brush it. Then I cleaned her false teeth, got water in a foot tub for her to soak her feet in, and a thousand other little things. It would be about twelve o'clock at night before I got in that little shaky bed. But as soon as I got in, Miss Ola would call me into her room and read to me. She slept in one of those old ante-bellum beds with big posts covered with a flowered canopy. It was high with big soft feather mattresses. I had to use a stool to get up in it. Most of the time, as soon as Miss Ola started reading, I was so tired that I fell asleep. I would just look up at that flowered canopy, close my eyes and I was out cold, sleeping down. I guess I never heard a single story she read to me.

During those nights with Miss Ola, I had access to the first bathroom I had ever used. I had never had such a

privilege before. I used to go in that bathroom and sit on the stool even if I didn't have to use it. I would just sit there and look at that big beautiful white tub, the pink curtain that hung over it, the pink washing powder in the big beautiful glass container, the sink with pink soap in the soap tray. It all looked so good to me. There was a small round pink rug in front of the stool. I would take my shoes off as I sat on the stool and just run my feet all over that soft rug. Sometimes I would stay in there so long Miss Ola would come in to see what I was doing. After taking my first bath in that beautiful white tub, I hated our round tin tub every time I bathed in it.

I liked everything about the Johnsons' house. There was always soft music playing on the radio as I did my little chores. The house was large and spacious with beautiful furniture all the way through it. It was everything ours wasn't.

I kept trying to learn the white folks' secret from Miss Ola. When I asked her questions about it, she didn't get mad like Mama. But she still didn't tell it to me. However, there was one secret I learned. That was why all white women had colored women working for them. Because they were lazy. Mama would clean that house up for those white folks every single day. She would make the beds, dust the furniture, run the vacuum, and clean the bath. Then she would cook three meals a day too. After eating the food Miss Ola made I could see Mama had to do the cooking because white women didn't know how.

Miss Ola had a cold one night when I was staying with her, and I saw her make some soup. She was coughing and mucus was running out of her nose and dripping right into the pot. Miss Ola was so old she had lost control of her bladder. Every time she coughed pee ran down her legs. Then she would wipe it off the floor with the dish towel. When she set some of that snotty-pee soup in front of me my stomach turned inside out. Now when she would ring that little bell for us on Saturday, Adline and Junior ran over there but I didn't. I finally realized what Mama meant when she said, "Miss Ola is gonna kill y'all with that shit she cooks."

Adline and Junior started school the second year we

afford the loaf of bread. So she bought ten pounds of flour instead of the five she had always bought. Each night she would make biscuits and fix two biscuits with peanut butter for each of us. I kept the lunch bag and Adline and Junior would come to me for their lunch at twelve. I remember that once when I was eating with some of my classmates, I pulled my peanut butter biscuits out of that lunch bag and they laughed at me all day.

After that embarrassment, I never took those biscuits to school again. We ate our lunch on our way to school every morning. All day long I was hungry but it was better than being laughed at by my classmates. Sometimes during the lunch hour Adline and Junior would tell me they were hungry and I would send them to the water fountain to fill up on water.

Times really got hard at home. Mama was trying to buy clothes for the three of us, feed us, and keep us in school. She just couldn't do it on five dollars a week. Food began to get even scarcer. Mama discovered that the old white lady living in the big white two-story house on the hill sold clabber milk to Negroes for twenty-five cents a gallon. Mama started buying two or three gallons a week from her. Now we ate milk-and-bread all the time (milk with crumbled cornbread in it). Then Mrs. Johnson started giving her the dinner leftovers and we ate those. Things got so bad that Mama started crying again. And she cried until school was out.

One Saturday I went to get some clabber milk and the old white lady asked me to sweep her porch and sidewalks. After I had finished she gave me a quarter and didn't take the quarter Mama had given me for the milk. When I got home and told Mama, she laughed until she cried. Then she sent me up there every day to see if the old lady wanted her porch swept. I was nine years old and I had my first job. I earned seventy-five cents and two gallons of milk a week.

Soon after I started working for that old lady, I stopped drinking her milk. One evening, I was cleaning the back porch where she kept it, when a little Negro boy came to buy two gallons. She came in to get them while he waited out in the backyard. She kept the milk in three old safes with screen doors. I saw her open one of them and

lived on the Johnsons' place. Now that they were in school, I had a problem on my hands. Junior was only four and a half and Adline six. Mama started him early because she didn't have anyone to keep him or for him to play with while Adline and I were in school. He wouldn't stay in his classroom because he thought he belonged with me and Adline. I was now nine years old and in the fourth grade. Junior would follow Adline everywhere she went. Sometimes I would look up and he was standing outside my classroom door peeping in. I think I must have taken him to his classroom at least ten times a day. During the lunch hour, he would follow me all over the campus holding onto my skirtail. I would send him to play with the other boys. Then a few minutes later, he came running around a corner telling me some boy was chasing him.

Mama was seeing the soldier again. He was out of the army now and he didn't wear his uniform any more. So now we called him "Raymond" instead of "the soldier." He was coming to the house every other night now. When he was there he would help us with our lessons. Mama never did help us. She said she had only finished sixth grade, and she could barely read my fourth grade reader. But Raymond had almost finished high school. He could read and work arithmetic better than my teacher. I didn't need much help from Raymond because Miss Ola helped me a lot when I stayed with her. She had taught me lots of words and showed me how to spell and write them too. Because of Miss Ola's help, I made all A's in reading and spelling. In arithmetic, with a little help from Raymond, I made B's. In no time at all I was doing my homework without any help from anyone. Adline and Junior were the big problems. Raymond had to work so hard with them. He would take Junior over his lesson eight or nine times but Junior wouldn't remember a single word afterward. He was a dumb little thing. Adline wasn't as dumb as Junior, but she didn't do much better. She thought it was funny to learn words. She would laugh the whole time Raymond was helping her. They never did learn their 1-2-3's.

When I was the only one going to school, Mama would buy one loaf of bread a week and a jar of peanut butter and jelly for lunch. I had a peanut butter sandwich every day. Now that all three of us were in school, she couldn't

really want to quit working for her. I got a good feeling out of earning three quarters and two gallons of milk a week. It made me feel good to be able to give Adline and Junior each a quarter and then have one for myself.

When school started again things were still pretty rough, so Mrs. Johnson got one of her friends, Mrs. Claiborne, to give me a job. Mrs. Claiborne taught Home Economics at the white school. I worked for her every evening after school and all day Saturdays. I really liked this job because I made almost as much as Mama. Mrs. Claiborne paid me three dollars a week and the work was easy compared to what I had been doing for seventy-five cents. Now I could pay our way to the movies every Saturday and then give Mama two dollars to buy bread and peanut butter for our lunch. Besides that I was learning a lot from Mrs. Claiborne. She taught me what a balanced meal was and how to set a table and how to cook foods we never ate at home. I'd never known anything about having meat, vegetables, and a salad. I enjoyed learning these things, not that they were helpful at our house. For instance, we never set a table because we never had but one fork or spoon each; we didn't have knives and didn't need them because we never had meat.

Mrs. Claiborne was in charge of selling candy, peanuts, and hot dogs during the Friday night football and basketball games at her school. On Saturdays when I went to work she would give me the leftover wieners and some of the peanuts and candy. Now, when I got off work on Saturdays, I'd run all the way home with what she had given me. Adline and Junior would be sitting out in the street waiting on me. I'd give them some of the peanuts and candy and take the wieners to Mama. On Sunday she'd make them for us. The wieners and the three dollars a week that I earned kept us from being hungry at school and at home.

Mrs. Claiborne's husband was a businessman. The only thing I knew about businessmen at the time was that they carried brief cases, smoked cigars, and wore suits every day. Mr. Claiborne was nice, so I thought all businessmen were nice. One Saturday I was setting the table for them and he asked me to set up a place for myself. I sat down

44 COMING OF AGE IN MISSISSIPPI

pour some milk out of a big dishpan. Then she went out to the yard, leaving the safe door open. Now this old lady had eight cats that also lived on the back porch. About five of them scrambled into the open safe and began lapping up the milk in the dishpan. She was fussy about her cats so I didn't yell at them or shoo them away. I just let them eat. "She'll run them out and pour that milk out when she come back in," I thought.

But when she came back, she just let those cats help themselves. When they had had enough, she pushed them away from the milk and closed the safe door. I stood there looking at all of this and I thought of how many times I had drunk that milk. "I'll starve before I eat any more of it," I thought.

I could hardly wait to tell Mama, but when I did she didn't believe me. "She probably is gonna give the rest of that milk to them cats too. I don't think that woman would sell us milk she let cats eat out of," Mama said. I didn't argue with her. "I will still bring the milk home," I thought. "Y'all can eat it but not me."

I didn't keep that job long. That big old white house had the biggest porches I had ever seen. It had a porch on the bottom and top floors circling the entire house, which gave the house a rounded look. Pretty soon the old lady even had me sweeping the inside of the house downstairs where she lived and dusting the furniture. She started keeping me up there all day. Mama didn't like that. One day she kept me up there until after dark. Mama came up there and got me.

"What she got you doing she have you up there all day?" Mama asked me when we got home.

"I sweep the porches and dust the furniture and sweep the bottom house. I was washing out some stockings for her today," I told her.

"You go up there tomorrow and you tell her you ain't gonna come back no more, you heah. She been trying to kill you for seventy-five cent and that little shittin' milk she gives you. Tell her you gotta stay at home with Adline and Junior."

The next morning I went and swept the porches and cleaned the house and stayed up there all day. When I had finished, I told her what Mama told me to tell her. I didn't

CHILDHOOD

for Mrs. Claiborne to take care of all of us. It seemed as though any day she would have to quit work.

I had worked late for Mrs. Claiborne one evening and when I got off work, it was raining. I didn't have an umbrella or anything. By the time I got home, I was soaking wet. I was so mad because I had on my first new dress in almost two years. Mama had bought five yards of beautiful pink flowered material for a dollar at the bargain store. She had a lady make dresses for me and Adline. We had both worn our dresses to school that day. Now mine was all wet and had lost its newness. All the way home, I was thinking about my wet sagging dress and Adline's new dress hanging against the wall still looking new.

When I walked in the door, Mama was singing. I forgot about my wet dress. Instead of looking depressed and sick as usual, she seemed so happy. Dripping wet, I stood in the door a long time just looking at her. I didn't know why she was happy and I didn't really care. I was just glad to see her like this. She was walking around carrying her big belly like it was as light as a feather.

"Take that wet dress off before you git a cold!" she said as she noticed me standing in the door. Any other time she would have said something like, "Look how wet you is. Why didn't you wait till it stopped raining!" That night I listened to see if she would cry and she didn't. So I didn't have anything to cry for that night, either.

She walked around in that spell of happiness for three or four days. Then one evening I came home after work and found Raymond there. When I walked in the door he was rubbing her belly and she was blushing down. I got so mad standing in that door, I started trembling with anger. I felt like going up to him and slapping his hand off her belly. Mama was laughing now, I thought, but I knew she would be crying again as soon as her belly went down and he made it big again. When they noticed me standing in the door looking at him disapprovingly he jerked his hand away. Mama stopped blushing. They both could tell that I didn't like it at all. In fact when he left, I didn't say anything to Mama. I just went about the house doing anything I could find to do to keep from talking to her. Raymond had brought some candy for us. Adline and Junior were eating theirs and grinning, but I didn't touch the candy Mama

46 COMING OF AGE IN MISSISSIPPI

with them—the first white people I had ever eaten at the same table with. I was so nervous. We sat in silence eating. Dessert was served and then they started talking to me.

"Essie, how do you like school?" Mr. Claiborne asked. "Oh, it's all right," I answered.

"What kind of grades you make?" he asked.

"I make A's in everything but arithmetic and I make B's in that," I said.

"See, I told you she's very smart," Mrs. Claiborne said.

"What would you like to do after you finish school, Essie?" he asked.

"I don't know. Mama say I could be a teacher like Mrs. Claiborne and Mrs. Johnson," I said. Mr. Claiborne just nodded his head.

When I was doing the dishes Mrs. Claiborne came to help me and she told me that Mr. Claiborne thought that I was very smart. She said that she didn't know many ten-year-old girls who worked to keep herself and her sister and brother in school. After that Saturday, I ate with them every time I was there for a meal. They started treating me like I was their own child. They would correct me when I spoke wrong, and Mrs. Claiborne would tell me about places she had traveled and people she met while traveling. I was learning so much from them. Sick or well, I went to work. I was afraid if I stayed home I would miss out on something.

I came home from work one day and it seemed as though Mama's belly had gotten big overnight. I knew she was going to have another baby. And I also knew it was for Raymond. Now that she had gotten fat he wasn't coming by any more. He hadn't been to the house in almost a month. Again Mama started crying every night, like she did when Junior was a baby and my daddy was staying with Florence all the time. Then I thought Raymond had left her for that yellow woman his people wanted him to marry. When I heard Mama crying at night, I felt so bad. She wouldn't cry until we were all in bed and she thought we were sleeping. Every night I would lie awake for hours listening to her sobbing quietly in her pillow. The bigger she got the more she cried, and I did too. I cried because I thought she would make me quit school and work full time

had left for me. If Adline and Junior knew Raymond had made Mama cry every night like I did they wouldn't be eating that candy either, I thought.

Later that evening when I was taking my bath in the tin tub, Mama came in the kitchen. Without saying a word, she got down on her knees with her belly touching the tub and washed my back. She was still happy, but she knew I wasn't. She was putting lots of soap on my back and scratching it and rubbing it good. Usually she fussed at us for using so much soap.

"We gonna be moving pretty soon," she said.

I sat there stiff and didn't say anything. "The Johnsons probably is asking her to move because she is too big to work," I thought. She kept rubbing my back.

"Ray done built us a new house," she said.

"What!" I yelled, almost jumping out of the tub.

"And you can quit working for Mrs. Claiborne as soon as we move," she said.

"Mrs. Claiborne treat me good and I don't want to stop working for her," I said.

"O.K., you can go on working for her if you want to. But Ray will be able to take care of us now," she said.

I cried that night because I was so happy. I no longer hated Raymond for feeling Mama's belly. All night I lay awake thinking of how Mama must be feeling to have someone build a house for her after she had been killing herself for more than seven years working on one job after another trying to feed us and keep us in school and all. We had moved six times since she and Daddy separated. Now she would have a place of her own. And we were going to be moving off white people's places probably for good.

pecans. I didn't want to leave her in the house by herself," Mama answered.

"Oh, I see you brought your own sacks too. Good! C'mon, I'll drive y'all down in the bottom. I want y'all to pick them up next to the road first 'cause them little boys keep runnin' in there pickin' them up." Mr. Wheeler put his two little boys in front of the pickup truck and we all piled into the back—Mama, me, Adline, Junior, James, and the baby. As Mr. Wheeler drove past his cattle, Mama said, "Boy, looka that milk in them cow's titties. Shit, if I had all them cows, I would never get through eatin' steaks and drinkin' milk." As he drove through the pecan orchard, we could see pecans piled on the ground about two inches thick. "Look at 'im how he's drivin' the truck through them pecans! He coulda let us walk down here," Mama said, looking like she wanted to jump right out and get started. She was the first one off the truck when we got to the bottom.

It had rained heavily the day before and just about all the pecans on the trees had fallen. We all had gallon buckets and we could almost fill them just by raking them around on the ground. Even little Jennie Ann, who wasn't a year old, was stumbling around on the ground picking up pecans. "C'mon, Jennie Ann! Looka here! Help your mama make some money," Mama laughed every time Jennie Ann dropped some pecans in her bucket.

It was almost dark when Mama sent Junior up to the house to say we were ready to knock off. When Mr. Wheeler came down, we were all standing out there with muddy hands and knees. Jennie Ann was muddy all over. We looked like a bunch of clowns standing there behind four full croker sacks.

"Boy, y'all look like y'all had fun down here today. My land, I ain't never had anybody work that fast! Look at all them pecans!" Mr. Wheeler said. The croker sacks were so heavy that all of us had to help him put them in the truck.

We had picked the pecans up on half. Since we had four sacks, I had expected Mr. Wheeler to give us two of them. But instead he measured them out, gallon for gallon, to make sure we didn't have an ounce more than he did. He

CHAPTER 7

We started to school in our same old school clothes and broken-down shoes. I ran around looking for a job for a week or so but I couldn't find anything. I went back to Mrs. Claiborne but she had someone else working for her. She said she'd ask her friends if any of them needed help. I checked every day, and none of them did. Then one day we came in from school and Mama had a stack of croker sacks out on the porch.

As I walked into the house she said, "Essie Mae, y'all hurry up and eat. Shit, Mr. Wheeler came by here today. He want us to pick up pecans. He say that ground is just loaded with 'em. We could make enough money to buy all y'all school clothes."

As soon as we finished eating we grabbed the croker sacks and ran all the way to Mr. Wheeler's house. He lived right on the other side of the project from us, in a big white house. He was a rancher and he owned lots of land in the area. Right down the hill from his house he had a big pecan orchard. As we walked up the gravel driveway, we could see him out in his backyard playing with his children.

"I sure hope he ain't let nobody else pick 'em up," Mama said. "I told him we'd be up there as soon as y'all got outta school. He look like he don't even know we're comin'."

"Elmira, where you carryin' that baby to? She'll get fulla ticks out there in that grass," Mr. Wheeler said as we approached.

I was so excited about going to pick up pecans, I hadn't even noticed that Mama was carrying Jennie Ann.

"My little boy here gonna keep her while we pick up

92 COMING OF AGE IN MISSISSIPPI

kept us there for two hours measuring the pecans. We got home about eight that night. Next evening after school we went back and finished them up. That Saturday morning Mama and Raymond drove the pecans to Woodville, where they could get eighteen cents a pound instead of the fifteen cents they got paid in Centreville. In all we had picked up a hundred and twenty dollars' worth. Mama used the money to buy school clothes for us—shoes, dresses, and pants.

We picked up pecans the following week for Miss Minnie, an old lady who was living across the road from Mr. Wheeler. After we'd finished, Miss Minnie asked me to sweep her porch, then she asked if I would help her some evenings, so I began working for her. I had to burn her trash and then sweep her porches and halls. She paid me three dollars a week and also let me pick up the few pecans that were left after the first big picking. I sold them and made as much as six dollars a week during the season. Then when the pecans were all gone I started baby-sitting for Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins, a young couple who rented rooms next door from Miss Minnie. They had one child, a little girl named Donna who had just started walking, and another child on the way.

Since Mrs. Jenkins had had trouble giving birth to Donna, she was extremely nervous about her second pregnancy. She was expecting in two months and she had gotten so big that everybody thought she'd have twins. They couldn't really afford help, but little Donna was getting to be too much for Mrs. Jenkins, so they hired me to keep the child out of her way. I took her for walks, read her stories, and made up games for her to play. We would spend hours under Miss Minnie's pecan tree, playing and picking up pecans.

I used to feel funny calling Mrs. Jenkins "Mrs. Jenkins" because she didn't look too much older than me. When she saw that it bothered me, she told me that her first name was Linda Jean and that when I called her Mrs. Jenkins it reminded her too much of her mother, who demanded that everyone, especially Negroes, call her "Mrs." I began to really like Linda Jean after that. She treated me just like

I was one of her friends and I never thought about our color difference when I was with her, except when she paid me. Only then was I reminded that I was her maid. When I told Linda Jean I was the oldest of five and that my mother was also expecting, she said, "Boy, you should know more about children than me." Sometimes, when she would get one of her sick spells, she would even ask me what to do, like I was an authority on having babies.

She was so nice to me that when I saw her struggling with the housework, I started helping her even though I was only paid to take care of Donna. A few weeks before she was about to get down they began paying me to do *all* the housework and take care of Donna too. Altogether they paid me twelve dollars a week, the most I had ever earned. I felt a little guilty about taking that much money from them because I knew they couldn't afford it, but things were so bad at home that I had to.

One day I was in the kitchen washing dishes for Linda Jean while she was up front talking to the lady who lived in the big white frame house next door. She was a good-looking, tall slim woman with mingled gray and black hair. I had just finished washing the cake mixer and I didn't know where to put it.

"Linda Jean," I called, "where do the cake mixer go?"

"Far left-hand corner of the cupboard," she yelled back.

A moment later the lady from next door appeared in the kitchen door.

"Is *that* what you call Mrs. Jenkins—Linda Jean?" she asked angrily.

I looked at her, puzzled, thinking to myself, "Now what in the shit does *she* mean?"

Suddenly Linda Jean was there, shouting.

"Mama! Essie works for *me!* I told you about trying to run my life!"

She was standing in the door behind the lady who I now realized was her mother. Linda Jean was so angry that she was shaking. Her mother glared at her for a moment, then walked out.

Linda Jean was so upset that she went to lie down for a while. As I finished the dishes I wondered why Linda Jean's mother, whom I had seen raking leaves in her back-

yard while Donna and I were playing under the pecan tree, had never said anything to me. I didn't even figure she knew Linda Jean.

When I finished the dishes I knocked softly at Linda Jean's door. She was awake and asked me in.

"I finished the kitchen. Would you like for me to do anything else while Donna is sleep?" I asked.

"Look, Essie, don't get upset by Mama. She's got to learn once and for all that I am not like her," she said, not even answering my question. She kept on talking and I just stood there listening.

"At the last minute she comes over and wants to know if she can help! She didn't approve of me marrying Bill and she didn't help me at all when I had my trouble with Donna. She even wanted me to kill the baby when I was pregnant. After Bill and I ran off and got married she didn't even speak to me for months. *Now* she wants to help! Bill doesn't want her in this house!"

On Saturday of that following week Linda Jean's mother, Mrs. Burke, was over again. She came in just as Linda Jean was paying me. She didn't say anything, but before I left for home I stopped on the back porch to pick up some towels that had fallen off the line and overheard her saying to Linda Jean, "I don't understand it! If you don't have any money why do y'all pay her twelve dollars? The richest people in town don't pay their help that much. Six dollars is the most *anyone* pays!"

"But, Mama, she does *everything*. It's not fair. I don't do *anything* around here," I heard Linda Jean say.

I was surprised to hear that I was making more than any maid in Centreville and it made me feel closer to Linda Jean. At the same time I felt even guiltier about taking it. I headed home, feeling sure that Linda Jean wouldn't let Mrs. Burke talk her into paying me less. But the next Saturday she gave me only six dollars. I was so shocked I couldn't say anything. I just took it and went home. I thought about it a lot and almost didn't go back. But since we needed even that six dollars so badly, I went back on Monday evening.

I noticed that Linda Jean and Mrs. Burke seemed to be getting along a little better, because Mrs. Burke was over a lot more. I figured Mrs. Burke was now helping them out.

I knew that Linda Jean wasn't like her and that she still couldn't stand her, but that she was just going along with her for the money.

A few days later, Linda Jean went into the hospital. That Saturday I went up and gave the house a thorough cleaning. Mrs. Burke was watching Donna. I finished my work early, but since I had to wait for Mr. Jenkins to pay me, I went over to Miss Minnie's to see if she needed anything done. While I was rinsing out some clothes for her she happened to mention that Mr. Jenkins was the son of the sheriff of Woodville. I had heard a lot of bad things about the sheriff. He was known as a "nigger hater" and was one of the meanest sheriffs in the whole area. The thought that I was working for the son of such a terrible man frightened me.

When I finished Miss Minnie's wash, I found something else to do because I was too scared to go back next door. Finally I heard Mr. Jenkins drive up in his big gasoline truck. Now I remembered how some evenings he came home all greasy and black and smelling of gas and oil, looking like he hated driving that truck for a living. The dirtier he was, the angrier he looked. Linda Jean would be quiet around him when he was in that mood. He had hardly ever said anything to me, so I couldn't tell what he thought about Negroes but now that I knew he was the sheriff's son, I could almost see him being mean and cruel too.

I knew that the first thing he did when he got home every evening was scrub all of that gummy oil and grease off his hands, so I stayed over to Miss Minnie's until I thought he had finished washing up. I didn't want to have to wait around for my pay. When I finally went over, there he was in the kitchen, just as dirty as anything, going through a box of tools. He had a big wrench in one hand and was digging into the box with the other. I could tell he was angry by the way he dug into the box. Beads of sweat were popping out on his balding head. I stood looking at him for a while wondering if I should go home without my pay. Just as I was about to leave, he looked up and said, "Oh, Essie, I thought you were gone. Go over next door and get Donna and dress her for me, please. I wanta take her to see Linda Jean."

On my way to Mrs. Burke's I decided that even though Mr. Jenkins was the sheriff's son, he didn't talk mean to

me. As the weeks went by, I gradually forgot who his father was.

Shortly after Linda Jean had her baby, Mama had hers. And she almost had it in the courthouse. A few days before she gave birth, she made up her mind that she and Raymond would finally get married with or without Miss Pearl's consent. She had been pouting at Raymond for over a week. Then one day they got all dressed up. Raymond put on his old blue suit that had hung in the closet for so long it had turned purple. It was one of those old-fashioned, 1920's-looking, double-breasted suits with wide sleeves and legs. Mama put on her best maternity dress. As they dressed, they barely said a word to each other. Raymond looked very sad and scared. I thought it was about time Mama made up her mind that she had had enough babies for Raymond without being married to him. She had told me that she didn't want Miss Pearl them to know that she and Raymond were getting married. But I felt like running over there and throwing it up in Miss Pearl's face.

I sat on the porch and watched them walk to the car, Mama all hump-shouldered and with her mouth still stuck out, Raymond walking a little behind her looking like he was about to cry. They looked just like they were going to a funeral.

It seemed as though it took them an hour to get to the car, when it was only a few feet away from the house. Mama got in without even looking at Raymond. She sat there staring straight ahead of her, not looking anywhere in particular. Raymond very slowly backed the car out of the driveway. He didn't have a rear-view mirror so usually he would turn to the right and look out of the back window to make his turn. But today, instead of looking in Mama's direction, he backed the car straight out of the driveway without looking back at all. As he turned, he cut too short and drove the car right into the ditch. Mama didn't even move. She just sat there putting a little more puff into her pout. Raymond slammed out of the car, gave a curse, got back in, gunned the accelerator and the car shot out of the ditch. In the mood they were in, I wondered if they would make it to the courthouse.

I was still sitting on the porch when they got back. My

first thought was that they didn't go all the way to Woodville, they were back so quick, but I could tell that they had gotten married. When Raymond parked the car, I could hear the radio blaring rock-and-roll. Mama was grinning down. For the first time in a couple of weeks they were talking to each other. Raymond got out of the car, leaving the radio on, and went on down toward the hog pen, looking as if it was slowly dawning on him that he had just gotten married. Mama remained in the car listening to the song on the radio. All of a sudden she got out of the car and started twisting to the fast beat. Her big pregnant belly swayed from side to side.

"Essie Mae," she called, "look at me!" as if I wasn't already looking.

"You better stop that 'fore you fall down and break a hip or somethin'!" Raymond yelled, looking back. Just then the song ended. As Mama hit that last note I thought she would sling that baby up on the porch.

The baby must have got the message that it was safe to come out, because a few days later he was there. Mama was loving Raymond so at the time that she named him Raymond, Jr. and called him Jerry. Now it seemed like I could never get away from crying babies. When I went to work, Linda Jean's baby, Johnny, was bawling, and when I got home little Jerry was at it. And it was like that for a long while.

CHAPTER 10

Not only did I enter high school with a new name, but also with a completely new insight into the life of Negroes in Mississippi. I was now working for one of the meanest white women in town, and a week before school started Emmett Till was killed.

Up until his death, I had heard of Negroes found floating in a river or dead somewhere with their bodies riddled with bullets. But I didn't know the mystery behind these killings then. I remember once when I was only seven I heard Mama and one of my aunts talking about some Negro who had been beaten to death. "Just like them low-down skunks killed him they will do the same to us," Mama had said. When I asked her who killed the man and why, she said, "An Evil Spirit killed him. You gotta be a good girl or it will kill you too." So since I was seven, I had lived in fear of that "Evil Spirit." It took me eight years to learn what that spirit was.

I was coming from school the evening I heard about Emmet Till's death. There was a whole group of us, girls and boys, walking down the road headed home. A group of about six high school boys were walking a few paces ahead of me and several other girls. We were laughing and talking about something that had happened in school that day. However, the six boys in front of us weren't talking very loud. Usually they kept up so much noise. But today they were just walking and talking among themselves. All of a sudden they began to shout at each other.

"Man, what in the hell do you mean?"

"What I mean is these goddamned white folks is gonna start some shit here you just watch!"

"That boy wasn't but fourteen years old and they killed him. Now what kin a fourteen-year-old boy do with a

white woman? What if he did whistle at her, he might have thought the whore was pretty."

"Look at all these white men here that's fucking over our women. Everybody knows it too and what's done about that? Look how many white babies we got walking around in our neighborhoods. Their mama's ain't white either. That boy was from Chicago, shit, everybody fuck everybody up there. He probably didn't even think of the bitch as white."

What they were saying shocked me. I knew all of those boys and I had never heard them talk like that. We walked on behind them for a while listening. Questions about who was killed, where, and why started running through my mind. I walked up to one of the boys.

"Eddie, what boy was killed?"

"Moody, where've you been?" he asked me. "Everybody talking about that fourteen-year-old boy who was killed in Greenwood by some white men. You don't know nothing that's going on besides what's in them books of yours, huh?"

Standing there before the rest of the girls, I felt so stupid. It was then that I realized I really didn't know what was going on all around me. It wasn't that I was dumb. It was just that ever since I was nine, I'd had to work after school and do my lessons on lunch hour. I never had time to learn anything, to hang around with people my own age. And you never were told anything by adults.

That evening when I stopped off at the house on my way to Mrs. Burke's, Mama was singing. Any other day she would have been yelling at Adline and Junior them to take off their school clothes. I wondered if she knew about Emmet Till. The way she was singing she had something on her mind and it wasn't pleasant either.

I got a shoe, you got a shoe,

All of God's chillun got shoes;

When I get to hebben, I'm gonna put on my shoes,

And gonna tromp all over God's hebben.

When I get to hebben I'm gonna put on my shoes,

And gonna walk all over God's hebben.

Mama was dishing up beans like she didn't know anyone was home. Adline, Junior, and James had just thrown

their books down and sat themselves at the table. I didn't usually eat before I went to work. But I wanted to ask Mama about Emmett Till. So I ate and thought of some way of asking her.

"These beans are some good, Mama," I said, trying to sense her mood.

"Why is you eating anyway? You gonna be late for work. You know how Miss Burke is," she said to me.

"I don't have much to do this evening. I kin get it done before I leave work," I said.

The conversation stopped after that. Then Mama started humming that song again.

When I get to hebben, I'm gonna put on my shoes,
And gonna tromp all over God's hebben.

She put a plate on the floor for Jennie Ann and Jerry.

"Jennie Ann! you and Jerry sit down here and eat and don't put beans all over this floor."

Ralph, the baby, started crying, and she went in the bedroom to give him his bottle. I got up and followed her.

"Mama, did you hear about that fourteen-year-old Negro boy who was killed a little over a week ago by some white men?" I asked her.

"Where did you hear that?" she said angrily.

"Boy, everybody really thinks I am dumb or deaf or something. I heard Eddie them talking about it this evening coming from school."

"Eddie them better watch how they go around here talking. These white folks git a hold of it they gonna be in trouble," she said.

"What are they gonna be in trouble about, Mama? People got a right to talk, ain't they?"

"You go on to work before you is late. And don't you let on like you know nothing about that boy being killed before Miss Burke them. Just do your work like you don't know nothing," she said. "That boy's a lot better off in heaven than he is here," she continued and then started singing again.

On my way to Mrs. Burke's that evening, Mama's words kept running through my mind. "Just do your work like you don't know nothing." "Why is Mama acting so scared?"

I thought. "And what if Mrs. Burke knew we knew? Why must I pretend I don't know? Why are these people killing Negroes? What did Emmett Till do besides whistle at that woman?"

By the time I got to work, I had worked my nerves up some. I was shaking as I walked up on the porch. "Do your work like you don't know nothing." But once I got inside, I couldn't have acted normal if Mrs. Burke were paying me to be myself.

I was so nervous, I spent most of the evening avoiding them going about the house dusting and sweeping. Everything went along fairly well until dinner was served.

"Don, Wayne, and Mama, y'all come on to dinner. Essie, you can wash up the pots and dishes in the sink now. Then after dinner you won't have as many," Mrs. Burke called to me.

If I had the power to mysteriously disappear at that moment, I would have. They used the breakfast table in the kitchen for most of their meals. The dining room was only used for Sunday dinner or when they had company. I wished they had company tonight so they could eat in the dining room while I was at the kitchen sink.

"I forgot the bread," Mrs. Burke said when they were all seated. "Essie, will you cut it and put it on the table for me?"

I took the cornbread, cut it in squares, and put it on a small round dish. Just as I was about to set it on the table, Wayne yelled at the cat. I dropped the plate and the bread went all over the floor.

"Never mind, Essie," Mrs. Burke said angrily as she got up and got some white bread from the breadbox.

I didn't say anything. I picked up the cornbread from around the table and went back to the dishes. As soon as I got to the sink, I dropped a saucer on the floor and broke it. Didn't anyone say a word until I had picked up the pieces.

"Essie, I bought some new cleanser today. It's setting on the bathroom shelf. See if it will remove the stains in the tub," Mrs. Burke said.

I went to the bathroom to clean the tub. By the time I got through with it, it was snow white. I spent a whole hour

scrubbing it. I had removed the stains in no time but I kept scrubbing until they finished dinner.

When they had finished and gone into the living room as usual to watch TV, Mrs. Burke called me to eat. I took a clean plate out of the cabinet and sat down. Just as I was putting the first forkful of food in my mouth, Mrs. Burke entered the kitchen.

"Essie, did you hear about that fourteen-year-old boy who was killed in Greenwood?" she asked me, sitting down in one of the chairs opposite me.

"No, I didn't hear that," I answered, almost choking on the food.

"Do you know why he was killed?" she asked and I didn't answer.

"He was killed because he got out of his place with a white woman. A boy from Mississippi would have known better than that. This boy was from Chicago. Negroes up North have no respect for people. They think they can get away with anything. He just came to Mississippi and put a whole lot of notions in the boys' heads here and stirred up a lot of trouble," she said passionately.

"How old are you, Essie?" she asked me after a pause.

"Fourteen. I will soon be fifteen though," I said.

"See, that boy was just fourteen too. It's a shame he had to die so soon." She was so red in the face, she looked as if she was on fire.

When she left the kitchen I sat there with my mouth open and my food untouched. I couldn't have eaten now if I were starving. "Just do your work like you don't know nothing" ran through my mind again and I began washing the dishes.

I went home shaking like a leaf on a tree. For the first time out of all her trying, Mrs. Burke had made me feel like rotten garbage. Many times she had tried to instill fear within me and subdue me and had given up. But when she talked about Emmett Till there was something in her voice that sent chills and fear all over me.

Before Emmett Till's murder, I had known the fear of hunger, hell, and the Devil. But now there was a new fear known to me—the fear of being killed just because I was black. This was the worst of my fears. I knew once I got

food, the fear of starving to death would leave. I also was told that if I were a good girl, I wouldn't have to fear the Devil or hell. But I didn't know what one had to do or not do as a Negro not to be killed. Probably just being a Negro period was enough, I thought.

A few days later, I went to work and Mrs. Burke had about eight women over for tea. They were all sitting around in the living room when I got there. She told me she was having a "guild meeting," and asked me to help her serve the cookies and tea.

After helping her, I started cleaning the house. I always swept the hallway and porch first. As I was sweeping the hall, I could hear them talking. When I heard the word "nigger," I stopped sweeping and listened. Mrs. Burke must have sensed this, because she suddenly came to the door.

"Essie, finish the hall and clean the bathroom," she said hesitantly. "Then you can go for today. I am not making dinner tonight." Then she went back in the living room with the rest of the ladies.

Before she interrupted my listening, I had picked up the words "NAACP" and "that organization." Because they were talking about niggers, I knew NAACP had something to do with Negroes. All that night I kept wondering what could that NAACP mean?

Later when I was sitting in the kitchen at home doing my lessons, I decided to ask Mama. It was about twelve-thirty. Everyone was in bed but me. When Mama came in to put some milk in Ralph's bottle, I said, "Mama, what do NAACP mean?"

"Where did you git that from?" she asked me, spilling milk all over the floor.

"Mrs. Burke had a meeting tonight—"

"What kind of meeting?" she asked, cutting me off.

"I don't know. She had some women over—she said it was a guild meeting," I said.

"A guild meeting," she repeated.

"Yes, they were talking about Negroes and I heard some woman say 'that NAACP' and another 'that organization,' meaning the same thing."

"What else did they say?" she asked me.

"That's all I heard. Mrs. Burke must have thought I was listening, so she told me to clean the bathroom and leave."

"Don't you ever mention that word around Mrs. Burke or no other white person, you heah! Finish your lesson and cut that light out and go to bed," Mama said angrily and left the kitchen.

"With a Mama like that you'll never learn anything," I thought as I got into bed. All night long I thought about Emmet Till and the NAACP. I even got up to look up NAACP in my little concise dictionary. But I didn't find it. The next day at school, I decided to ask my homeroom teacher Mrs. Rice the meaning of NAACP. When the bell sounded for lunch, I remained in my seat as the other students left the room.

"Are you going to spend your lunch hour studying again today, Moody?" Mrs. Rice asked me.

"Can I ask you a question, Mrs. Rice?" I asked her.

"You *may* ask me a question, yes, but I don't know if you *can* or not," she said.

"What does the word NAACP mean?" I asked.

"Why do you want to know?"

"The lady I worked for had a meeting and I overheard the word mentioned."

"What else did you hear?"

"Nothing. I didn't know what NAACP meant, that's all." I felt like I was on the witness stand or something.

"Well, next time your boss has another meeting you listen more carefully. NAACP is a Negro organization that was established a long time ago to help Negroes gain a few basic rights," she said.

"What's it gotta do with the Emmett Till murder?" I asked.

"They are trying to get a conviction in Emmett Till's case. You see the NAACP is trying to do a lot for the Negroes and get the right to vote for Negroes in the South. I shouldn't be telling you all this. And don't you dare breathe a word of what I said. It could cost me my job if word got out I was teaching my students such. I gotta go to lunch and you should go outside too because it's nice and sunny out today," she said leaving the room. "We'll talk more when I have time."

About a week later, Mrs. Rice had me over for Sunday

dinner, and I spent about five hours with her. Within that time, I digested a good meal and accumulated a whole new pool of knowledge about Negroes being butchered and slaughtered by whites in the South. After Mrs. Rice had told me all this, I felt like the lowest animal on earth. At least when other animals (hogs, cows, etc.) were killed by man, they were used as food. But when man was butchered or killed by man, in the case of Negroes by whites, they were left lying on a road or found floating in a river or something.

Mrs. Rice got to be something like a mother to me. She told me anything I wanted to know. And made me promise that I would keep all this information she was passing on to me to myself. She said she couldn't, rather didn't, want to talk about these things to the other teachers, that they would tell Mr. Willis and she would be fired. At the end of that year she was fired. I never found out why. I haven't seen her since then.

CHAPTER 11

I was fifteen years old when I began to hate people. I hated the white men who murdered Emmett Till and I hated all the other whites who were responsible for the countless murders Mrs. Rice had told me about and those I vaguely remembered from childhood. But I also hated Negroes. I hated them for not standing up and doing something about the murders. In fact, I think I had a stronger resentment toward Negroes for letting the whites kill them than toward the whites. Anyway, it was at this stage in my life that I began to look upon Negro men as cowards. I could not respect them for smiling in a white man's face, addressing him as Mr. So-and-So, saying yessuh and nossuh when after they were home behind closed doors that same white man was a son of a bitch, a bastard, or any other name more suitable than mister.

Emmett Till's murder provoked a lot of anger and excitement among whites in Centreville. Now just about every evening when I got to work, Mrs. Burke had to attend a guild meeting. She had more women coming over now than ever. She and her friends had organized canvassing teams and a telephone campaign, to solicit for new members. Within a couple of months most of the whites in Centreville were taking part in the Guild. The meetings were initially held in the various houses. There were lawn parties and church gatherings. Then when it began to get cold, they were held in the high school auditorium.

After the Guild had organized about two-thirds of the whites in Centreville, all kinds of happenings were unveiled. The talk was on. White housewives began firing their maids and scolding their husbands and the Negro communities were full of whispered gossip.

The most talked-about subject was a love affair Mr. Fox,